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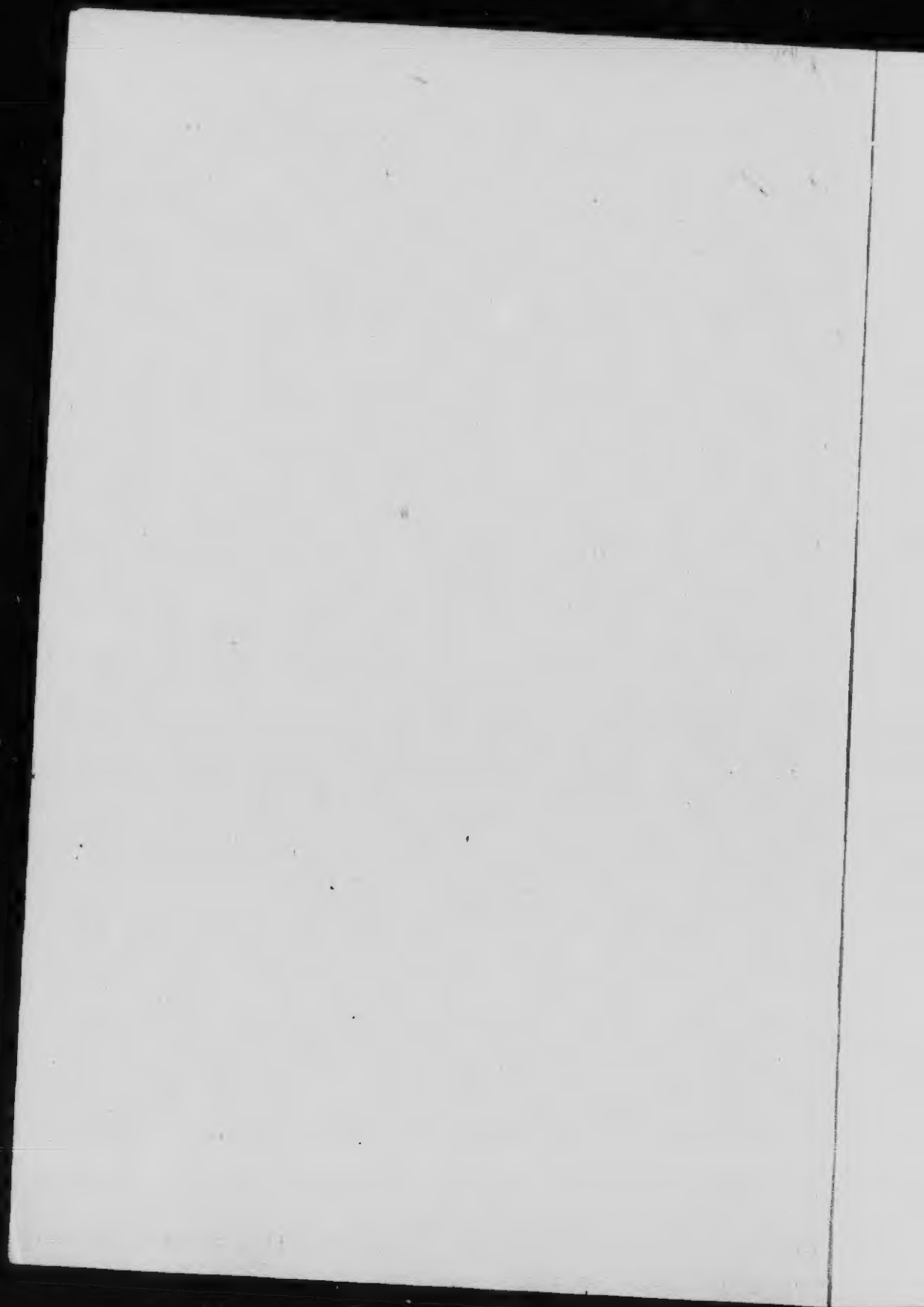
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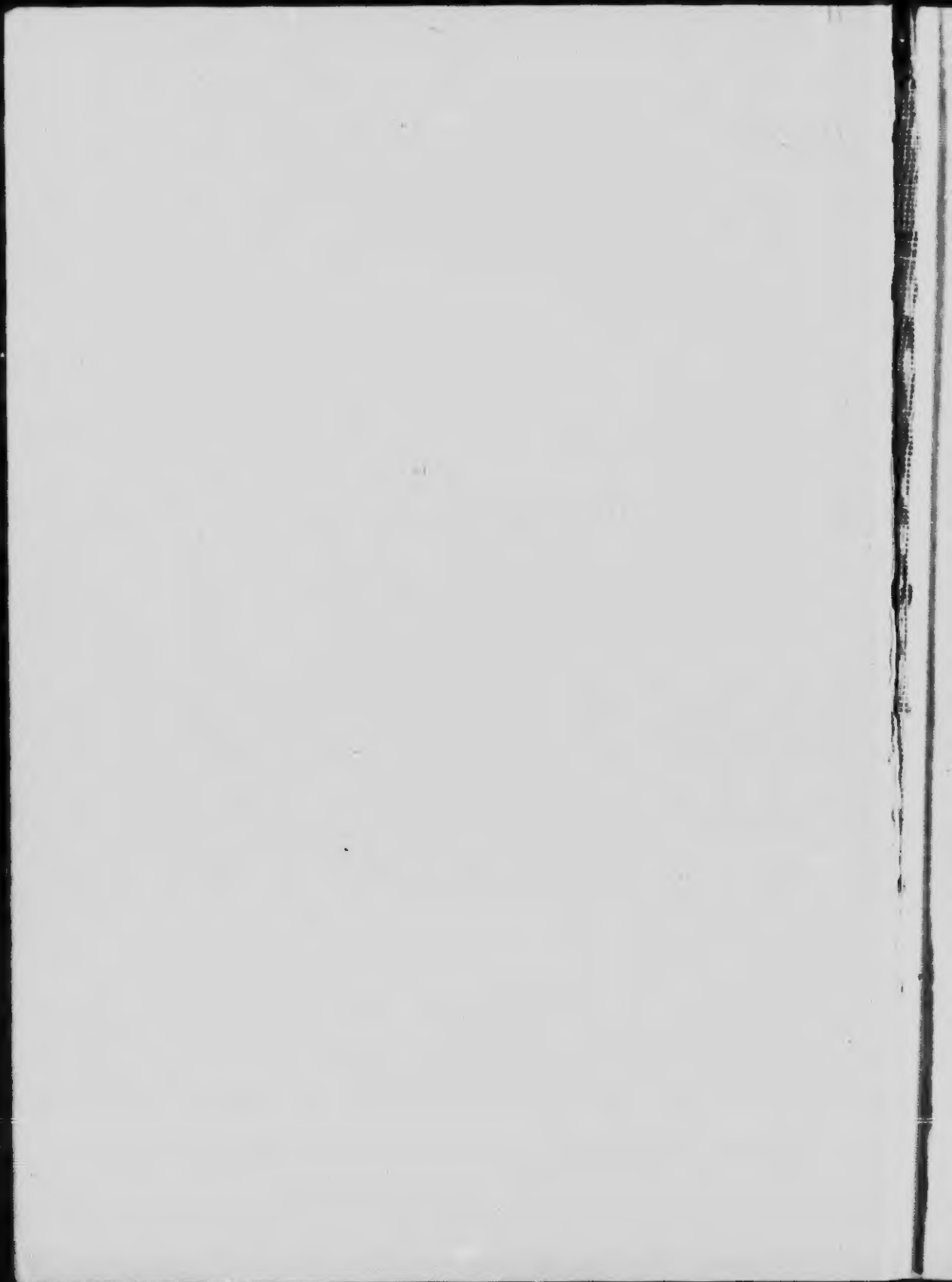
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**THE RIGHT
OF THE STRONGEST**



THE RIGHT OF THE STRONGEST

BY
FRANCES NIMMO GREENE

*"Daily injustice is done, and might
is the right of the strongest."
—Longfellow.*

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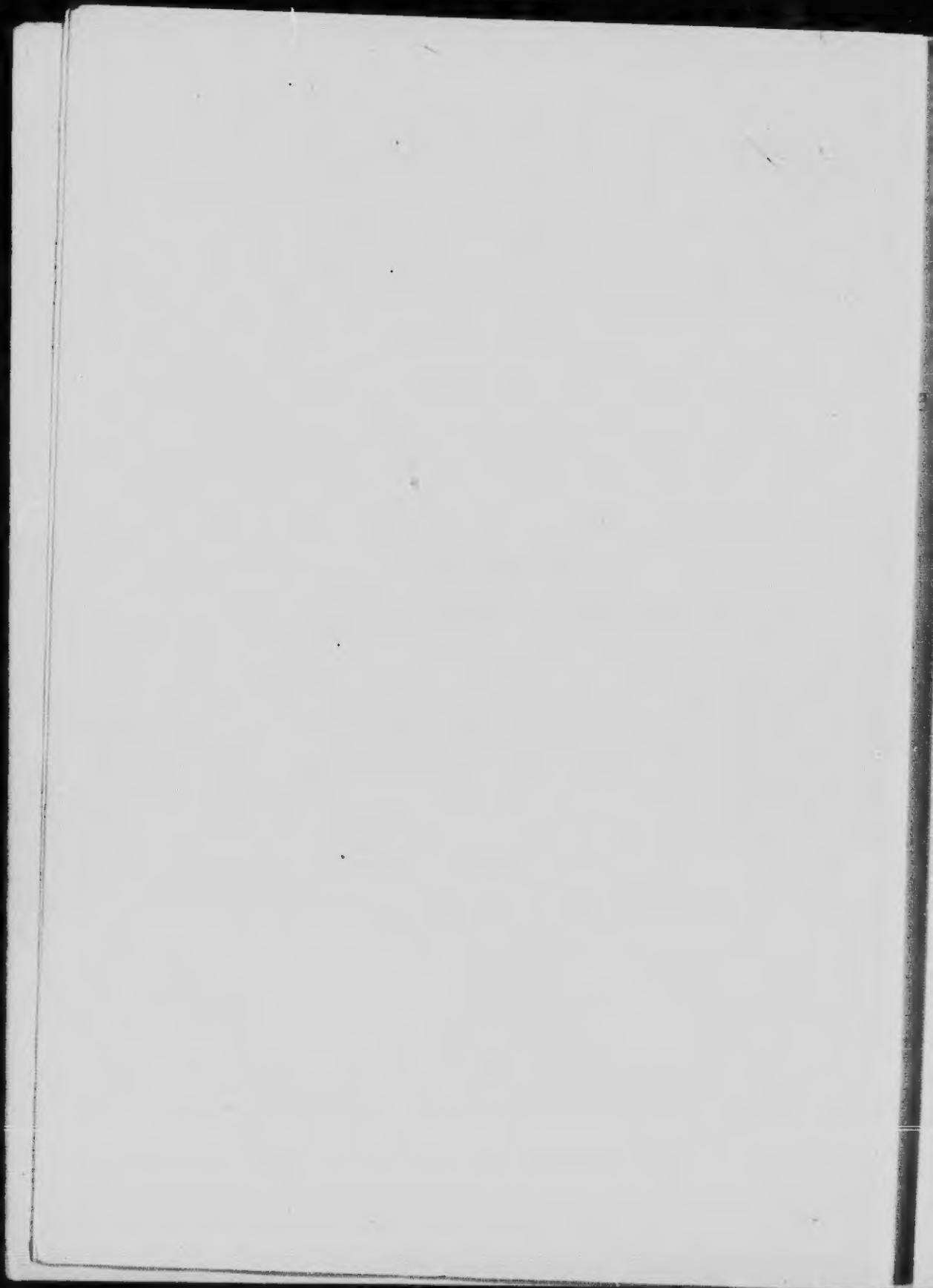
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**THE RIGHT
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THE RIGHT OF THE STRONGEST

CHAPTER I

WHETHER to take the big road that wound round the knob or the much shorter footpath across the hill was the question. Mary Elizabeth stood at the parting of the ways and pondered. Each route had its drawbacks. The longer and more frequented way had late arrival and a sharp scolding at the end, while the path that would take her home in time for supper led up the steep hill by the "ha'nted house" and down again through the dark-green twilight of the pine forest beyond.

The girl stopped in her tracks and demanded an explanation from herself. Was she, too, superstitious? Was she reverting to type?

With a quick, determined setting of the mouth, she turned sharply to the left and took the way of the haunted house and the dark forest. The steep hill at the beginning of her elected route gave her something on which to exercise her determination, and in a short while she had won the sharp acclivity and stood panting at the top.

The height gained, however, Mary Elizabeth found herself in less haste to accomplish the rest of the journey. She was all out of breath, she explained to herself by way of apology, so she scared

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the brown lizards off the nearest log and sat down a moment to rest.

It was the month and the hour in which the earth-tints, from the dust of the wayside to the tops of the tallest trees, blend in a yellow monochrome, and the all-pervading sunlight turns to gold. It was the season when, her year's tasks at an end, Nature sinks back into a dreamy repose—to peace and contentment and stillness—in the arms of the living God.

He was here, His feet were upon the mountains, the very solitude and silence were eloquent of Him. Here could linger no unsightly thing. The oak that spread its branches over her, with its huge trunk gnarled and twisted and misshapen, had taken on an added dignity through its very deformity, the tangle of muscadine vines beyond had caught a wilder grace from the rending hand of a long-spent storm, and all around, death and decay were transformed into things of beauty.

The girl sat for some minutes unwilling to stir, and so quiet was the scene that the sudden barking of a squirrel startled her like an irreverence, and she unconsciously laid her finger on her lips as a few half-dead leaves relinquished their precarious hold on the bough above her, and dropped about her with a sigh.

The spell was broken. Already the radiance was fading out of the atmosphere, the golden hour had turned to gray, and the shadows of night were lurking in the deep wood places.

The girl started to her feet and with a quick step resumed her way along the brown footpath. The "ha'nted house" was still to be passed, and this was the very hour in which "White-face Silas" was wont to walk. The place lay but a short distance ahead of her now, and already its ghost-trees showed white through the brown of the nearer woods—here a glint, and there a glint; and, after a few paces more, spread out in full view the blasted grove whose spectral tree-trunks sentinelled a scene of desolation. Mary Elizabeth stopped short at the verge of the haunted ground. The lines of determination about her mouth had melted away. Mary Elizabeth had reverted to type.

The forlorn yard-space stretched out in front of her, but no soft pine-needles or drift of tinted leaves drew a mantle of charity over it; only the weed-stubble and fallen limbs of dead trees spread out before her. Gone was the breathing beauty of the living forest, the promise of peace in the silentness, the spirit of God in the pulsing solitude. The place was dead. The whole scene was dead, blasted, forsaken; for man and sin had desolated it, and neither man nor God would tarry there.

A hundred yards in front of her, a little back among the blasted trees, stood a crumbling log cabin, dark, secretive, suggestive. The one window, with its every tiny pane of glass battered out, gave the house the look of a blinded thing. The front steps were rotting where they stood, and the front door, swinging precariously on one rusted hinge,

might conceal—any horrid thing. To the left was the well-house, an added abhorrence, a place for crawling, slimy things. One end of the rotting rope still hung from the windlass over the rusty wheel, but the bucket had long since broken away and fallen, down, down, down—Mary Elizabeth started with a shudder as she fancied she heard it still, bumping against the caving sides. Just beyond the well-house, in plain view, was the covered log pen in which Silas had kept his crazy father until an ice storm on the mountain had set the old man free forever!

For more years than anybody had thought to compute, White-faced Silas had cursed this spot with his living presence. He had "entered" the land, it was said. Certainly he had built the log house on it. If he had ever boasted a second name, it had long since been buried beneath the contempt of his familiar sobriquet. Where he came from, no one knew. What his sins were, no one had been able to reduce to a definite statement. As far as Mary Elizabeth knew, he had lived alone except for the questionable company of the maniac, and had died by his own hand in the end, taking his secrets with him. And they had found him a good three days after the horrid deed, and had forthwith cut him down from the rafter and carried him off to the grave; but the nights were not many, so the story went, before Silas was back again in his old haunts, whiter than before.

Mary Elizabeth went over every detail of the

gruesome story in her own mind while she hesitated to pursue a course that would, in its windings, bring her much nearer to the half-open, secretive door. And as she wavered and looked and listened, all at once, a white hand grasped the sagging door from the inside. The one rusty hinge uttered a harsh protest. Something was dragging it open! He was coming—White-faced Silas was opening the door!

The girl staggered where she stood and laid frantic hold of a dead tree for support, but she uttered never a sound. The next instant, however, her vision cleared, and she beheld on the threshold of the haunted house a sunburned young man who was very apparently alive throughout the whole six feet of him.

Obviously he had not caught sight of her, for he now stood with his hands in his pockets, whistling with all his might; but his tune had lasted for only a few sprightly strains, when he suddenly left the rotting doorstep and strode across the yard-space till he was within a few rods of where the astonished girl stood. When about twenty paces from the house, however, he paused and whirled in his tracks to take a re-survey of the spot he had quitted.

From her position as looker-on the girl scanned the stranger while he studied the premises. He was well-built, well-dressed, and clean-shaven, and carried his head up; and he was so big and strong and virile-looking that he didn't seem to comprehend in his aggressively material self even the making of a ghost.

There was nothing in that broad-shouldered back to make a girl afraid to pass within ten feet of it, so Mary Elizabeth started with quick step, mindful now that she must hasten on her journey. She hoped to pass unseen, or thought she did; but the swish of her skirts on the dry weeds announced her movements immediately, and caused the stranger to turn quickly in her direction. The first look of keen curiosity with which he swept her seemed to the self-conscious girl to give place immediately to an expression of something like astonishment. The next moment he looked away as if unmindful of her presence, but he removed his hat from his head and stood with it in his hands till she had passed him.

As Mary Elizabeth left the haunted scene she carried with her four distinct impressions: The stranger was instinctively courteous, his trousers were well creased down the front, he was surprised at something his second look had seen in her, and he was looking after her as she walked away.

But in a short while she knew that she was out of the range of his vision. Then it was that she remembered she was alone and far from home, and that the night was creeping upon her. Her thoughts of the stranger became less and less absorbing as she penetrated farther into the twilight of the pine forest and felt more and more the oppression of its abiding loneliness. Here were no romping squirrels to keep one company, no fluttering, falling leaves to add a touch of cheerful color and sound to the whole, no ghosts to be exorcised by interesting un-

knowns, no anything but solitude and the shadows of coming night. The spirit of the hour and the place was upon her; her nerves, so lately unstrung, were tense and quivering again. A bend in the descending path, and the girl stopped short. Some fifty yards farther down the way, with his back toward her, a negro sat on a stone by the wayside, idly whittling a stick. No spirit of loneliness, no menace of coming night, no ghost from beyond the grave to face now!—but——

Without stopping for a moment to reflect that here might be no danger, without making an instant's effort to rally her courage, the girl turned in her tracks and fled along the way she had come—back to the white man's protection.

But as she came again in sight of the haunted house she slackened her pace and tried to rally her composure. As she had desperately hoped, the stranger was still there. This time, he was trying to set straight the sagging door, so he did not hear her footfall till she was very near him. Admonished of her presence by the sound of her skirts on the dead weed stubble again, he looked up quickly and let fall the sagging door. A swift second glance, and he was at her side, asking with concern:

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing," the girl protested, unconscious that her white face gave the lie to her words; "but it's so late—so dark down there!"

"Who scared you?" he insisted.

"Oh, nobody, nobody at all; but the pines are

lonesome—and—I thought maybe you wouldn't mind——"

"Why, I'm delighted. The fact is I was about to run, myself, I'm that afraid of lonesomeness! Wait till I get my hat, please, ma'am."

The "please, ma'am" condoned a something in his reply that was not quite satisfactory to the girl, and by the time that he had rescued his hat from a low-hanging limb and returned to her, she was ready to forget.

"Honor bright," was his challenge on returning, "you did see somebody that scared you, didn't you?"

"No."

"Well, there's one thing you are not afraid of."

"What?"

"The old Bad Man that gets girls for telling what-you-may-call-'ems."

Without more ado he quietly assumed leadership and directed her steps over the now no longer fearsome path as seemed best to himself. And Mary Elizabeth followed where he led, paused for the rough underbrush to be held back for her, and allowed herself to be jumped across the deep places, all the while wondering to what dim remoteness her recent fears had fled. The spirit of loneliness had deserted the green twilight, the darkness was not half bad after all, and the lateness down there had in some unaccountable way grown earlier.

"You are not native here," the stranger said with conviction as he held a hawthorn spray aside for her to pass.

"Yes, I am."

He swept her from head to foot with a glance that brought the warm blood to her cheeks, and then added incisively: "Then this is the Looking-glass House."

"Why?" she demanded, with an abortive attempt to return the all but impertinent directness of his glance.

"Because here I find myself required to 'believe seven impossible things before breakfast,' or, what is just as hard, to believe one thing that is seven times more incredible than anything else."

"I can't help what you think about it, it's true. I belong to the hills—but I wasn't reared here."

"Oh, that's the secret of it! Well, I fancy you were quite a small baby when your parents took you away." He was evidently curious about her history.

"No," the girl answered ingenuously, "I was ten years old when I went to Mobile, and my father and mother were dead." They walked on in silence for a few rods, and then she resumed with a strange frankness: "A gentleman—one of these people we call 'philanthropists'—came on a prospecting tour through here about that time. He took me and educated me for a missionary to my people. Then he sent me back."

"He shouldn't have done it." The man spoke with decision.

"Why," the girl replied with an enigmatic hardness in her voice, "when you pay your money for anything, it's surely yours to do with as you please."

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The man looked at her curiously and then asked: "And are you going to stay here?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Till I can pay back dollar for dollar of his spending, and be quits with his solemn superiority!" she suddenly flamed out.

There was silence between them for a few moments, and then the girl burst out again impetuously: "But I don't want to! I don't *want* to be good. I—I——"

The stranger shot a quick, doubting glance at her, but the next instant the look in his eyes changed to one of quiet kindness as he finished her sentence for her—"You want to be *young*."

The conversation had shifted easily to a topic that would have been held sacred from discussion between those of nearer acquaintance. The intellectual currency of strangers is necessarily in big denominations, lacking the small coin of the personal and the commonplace.

The bend in the path disclosed no terrors this time, though the negro was still sitting by the wayside, harmlessly whittling the time away. A respectful "good-evening" from him as they approached brought him to the man's attention. When they had passed, the stranger grew speculatively silent and for some minutes let the girl talk on unaided. At length he said, entirely irrelevantly:

"I thought there were no negroes in this part of the country."

"Only a very few," she answered.

The pines were thinning out now, and the long dip of the mountain valley was opening to view. The girl hesitated, and stopped.

"I am not afraid now," she said; "you needn't trouble to come any farther."

"You are not home yet?"

"No, but I'm not afraid on the big road. Besides, it doesn't seem nearly so late, now that we are out of the woods."

"We will go on," he said, with a quiet setting aside of her decision. "The next time you pass my house," he continued easily, "I hope you'll find some of the bushes cleared out of your path."

"Your house?"

"The one up there that I was inspecting."

"But that house is——"

"Yes, and I have taken it, 'ha'nt' and all."

"But you are not going to live there!"

"Indeed I am; I'm going to move in as soon as I can get it disinfected and cleaned up."

"You—you——?"

The stranger removed his hat. "I am John Marshall, of Birmingham, and I too am serving a term of exile. May I tell you that I am glad to find such a denizen as you in this worse than Siberia?"

"My name is Mary Elizabeth Dale," answered the girl with a frank, direct glance. "And since you have to be exiled, I—am glad that you are here."

His hat was off again. "Thank you," he said.

The conversation drifted into an easier vein after this, and they soon arrived at an isolated log cabin which the girl had pointed out to him as "home." Here, true to an inherited custom, the owner had religiously cut away all sheltering trees, leaving his dwelling exposed to the pitiless extremes of the succeeding seasons. And here, as a consequence of bad cultivation, the true soil had been washed away and red gulleys had ploughed through the fair prospect, sapping the life of the fields.

They had reached the gully where the front gate should have stood, and the girl stopped and thanked the stranger by way of dismissal.

"One moment," he delayed. "May I give you some advice you seem to be sadly in need of?"

"Why, yes," wonderingly.

"You mustn't go along these country roads by yourself. It isn't safe." Mary Elizabeth hesitated in embarrassment, and he continued: "Do you often go alone?"

"Not often," she answered; "some of the school-children are nearly always with me."

"You don't *teach school*?" There was a note of sharp protest in the question.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, you don't look it"—then, whimsically: "Don't ever look it, hear!" But his face became earnest as he urged: "You are going to take my advice, aren't you?"

"As far as I can."

"But you must take it."

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth!" now came in sharp nasal tones from the cabin.

"Yes, I'm coming right now," answered the girl, nervously. "Good-night, Mr. Marshall—I'll try."

When Mary Elizabeth entered the cabin, the board blinds had already been closed and a coal-oil lamp was smoking on the supper table. A sour-faced old woman, presiding over a huge dish of cold pork and cow-peas, was flanked on each side by a hairy, black-browed man. Farther down the table, a little slim, yellowish, startled-looking girl dangled a pair of ineffable legs from a high stool and crammed cold corn-bread and molasses into her mouth with both hands.

Mary Elizabeth took her place beside "Surster," as the weird child was called and watched the process of stuffing with interest. But in a few minutes she looked up from the child with a start. One of the men had precipitately shoved at her everything on the table, and was regarding her solemnly with great, prominent eyes, while his huge Adam's apple played up and down his scraggy neck with emotion. The others were feeding, in absolute disregard of her.

"Thank you, Babe, but I don't think I'm hungry," she said. Then, catching the look of anxious concern in his ox-like eyes, she added hastily: "Yes, I'll take a glass of milk."

As she replaced the empty glass upon the table, the girl gave an inward start and her erstwhile speculative gaze suddenly widened.

"Bud," she exclaimed, addressing the surly man

at her left, "Bud, when a house has been a long time abandoned, how can a man get the right to take possession of it?"

Perhaps in her eagerness she failed to note that her abrupt question brought every one of her listeners to silent attention. "Who would have the right to give him permission?" she pressed.

The man addressed growled out an unintelligible answer, but his gentler opposite interpreted:

"The *owner*, Ma'y 'Lizbeth."

Dashed by the surliness of the morose Bud, the girl was silent for some minutes, but then burst out as with a sudden inspiration:

"Aunt Millie—Babe—wasn't there a disowned child connected in some way with the haunted house? It seems to me that I remember hearing a long time ago— Say, did White-faced Silas have a son——"

She stopped short, for Bud had turned on her a look which sent every vestige of color out of her face. Aunt Millie advised her sharply to attend to her own business. She looked to Babe for a gentle explanation, but he answered her never a word.

But alone in her little shed-room that night, Mary Elizabeth utterly set at naught Aunt Millie's sharp advice. The good-looking stranger loomed big in the near perspective of her mental vision, and she was surprised to reflect that all she had really learned about him was that he was John Marshall of Birmingham, and that he had taken the haunted house for an indefinite period. Who and what and why

he was, engaged her imagination through measureless spaces of the dark time, but when she had taxed her faculties to their utmost, she realized that she had been utterly unable to make a place for him in the economy of this narrow life here. There was—wasn't there—a disowned child somewhere? She must find out at once.—But how?

Suddenly a bright idea came to her. She would ride Sulphurina over to the store next Saturday and ask Uncle Beck. Aunt Millie's snuff would be out by that time and the old woman would be glad to let her go.

That much settled, the girl made a strong effort to compose herself to sleep, but other and more serious thoughts, thoughts which had been persistently with her of late, refused to be silenced. Recollections of the grave-eyed, reticent man who for years had given her everything, except something of himself, came back to haunt her. She had thought of him often, lately, and those thoughts had stirred something within her that was strangely akin to pain.

To-night she was unaccountably troubled. For the first time, she was unable to recall his stern features in thinking of him. The eyes were there, grave and unfathomable, but the face—the man—was lost. This was unpleasant, and she made a conscious effort to banish the impression, but all to no purpose. The grave-eyed memory haunted her last conscious moments, and lost itself only in the oblivion of a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER II

THE next Saturday found Mary Elizabeth threading her way through the gold-and-red glory of a crisp fall morning toward Uncle Beck and a solution of her little mystery. Life was kind to-day. Sulphurina never once threatened to plant her forefeet in balking protest, and the weather, the radiant season, and all the scampering wood things seemed disposed to make things pleasant for the girl. Then, some interesting disclosure must be awaiting her at the end of her journey, for Uncle Beck would surely tell her all about White-faced Silas, if she asked. With the exception of the silent, worshipful Babe, Uncle Beck was the one person who had been unfailingly kind to her since her return to her native hills, and she knew that she could depend on him.

Now, "all about White-faced Silas" would, at least it might, explain the stranger's reason for being. If it did not, it would surely precipitate a critical discussion of him, and she could listen and learn much, without seeming to be unduly interested in the new young man.

At this juncture, Sulphurina plodded around the last bend in the road and, across the green tops of a young red-oak thicket, the little, boxlike, unpainted frame store stared at the girl with mouth and eyes wide open. A rude interruption to the day-dreams of Sulphurina effected a quick abridg-

ment of the remaining distance and landed Mary Elizabeth at the shelf-like new-pine porch of the district store.

The familiar Saturday loungers were already there. Several young men were pitching horse-shoes in the dusty space in front and wrangling good-naturedly at each successive throw. Some three or four older men, stoop-shouldered, gaunt, and tanned, stretched their thin jeans-covered legs on the porch, and chewed and spat in solemn conclave. The ubiquitous small boy, clad in blue "overalls" which were patently over nothing in the world but the boy, was arranging a fight between two cur dogs on the steps. Uncle Beck, store-keeper and postmaster and cross-roads wit, was dispensing gossip and hospitality to another group inside.

"'Light an' hitch, Ma'y 'Lizbeth," he called out cheerily as the girl rode up. "Come in, honey, come in. Hold that thar hoss, Lem—whar's your manners this mornin'? Lord, but you're lookin' purty, gal. Ef I was about forty year younger, Babe Davis would have to hump hisself, he would!"

When Mary Elizabeth entered, there was an uneasy, shuffling giving-back of the group inside, accompanied by a round-robin stare and a sudden cessation of talk.

A long, merry-eyed, bronze-faced man shambled forward hospitably and answered the girl's cheery, "How are you this morning, Uncle Beck?" with:

"Fine, honey, fine; ef I was any better I jes couldn't stand hit."

With a flourish of what stands for courtliness in the hills, Uncle Beck "made her acquainted" with the half-dozen others who responded to her greeting with the shy but independent bearing that the girl had come to recognize as characteristic. In that one minute, however, it became apparent that a segregating element had been introduced into the erstwhile unified group, so Uncle Beck, after a few more kindly phrases, introduced Mary Elizabeth to his combination clerk-and-stable-boy as the "Queen of Sheeby," with the order that she be given the whole store, and himself set about repairing the break in the flow of neighborhood gossip. He draped his loose frame over a split-bottomed chair, and soon had his little group talking easily, if more quietly, again. This was just what the girl wished, so she took a seat on a cracker-box, with her back to the loungers, and examined bolt after bolt of blue and red calico with lingering indecision, all the while keeping her ears open and her understanding alert.

"No, sir-ee," it was Uncle Beck's voice speaking, "he didn't bring His-High-an'-Mightiness down here to do his own pickin', but he jes sent that thar man of his with a roll o' money as big as my arm. An' ef you'll b'lieve me, the feller come mighty nigh buyin' out my whole stock. Why, canned simmons ain't no more to him than sweet pertaters, an' he jes perched hisse'f a-straddle of a pile of our best jeans breeches an' waved his hand at the shelf o' peaches an' pineapples an' he says, says 'e, 'I'll take

all you got left of that thar swill, pardner.' After I had done got all his money, I passed a compliment on him he didn't seem to 'preciate." Uncle Beck chuckled, and the expected question came:

"What'd you say?"

"Why, I up an' says, says I, 'Sonny, you have got a 'complishment what I ain't never met up with before—you air the fust mortal man I ever see what could strut settin' down!'"

After the slow, solemn chuckle had subsided, a strange voice questioned:

"Wa-al, Beck, Minervy told me that she had heerd that you said the feller's boss actually bought curtains for his winders. Is that so?"

"So? Of course hit's so! By gum, didn't we nearly have to tear up the whole establishment to please him?"

"The man what hangs curtains to his winders *has got somethin' to hide!*" From the direction and the timbre of the voice Mary Elizabeth judged that the molasses barrel had delivered itself.

"You never said a truer word, Shan Thaggin," put in another. "For my part I don't put any too much trust in a man what *can* live in a ha'nted house. Seems like to me that this here neighborhood has had enough trouble along o' that place o' Silas's, 'thout gittin' mixed up with 'spicious characters nobody can't find out a durn thing about."

"Wa-al, I never was one to balk at a bridge when I got to hit, but I don't cross beforehand, neither, so I'm for waitin' till we git thar."

There was a finality in Uncle Beck's tone that caused Mary Elizabeth to fear he was about to change the subject, so she turned around quickly with the question:

"Uncle Beck, did White-faced Silas leave any children?"

A second of dead silence threw the question into bold relief, but the next minute Uncle Beck gathered his long legs under him noisily, rose to his feet, and walked squarely up to the questioning girl.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth, stick out your tongue. Ah, ha!"—after she had complied—"jes what I 'lowed. Hit's your liver, child. That's what's makin' your 'magination git the best of you. Now you go home, and to-night you take an' take a dost o' calomel. Jes about as much as you kin pile on a dime—" A smothered laugh from the others broke into Uncle Beck's directions, and somebody called out:

"Ast Shan Thaggin how much!"

"Don't min' them—" Uncle Beck was answering the sudden flush that overspread the girl's face. "The joke's on Shan. That's him over thar on the 'lasses bar'l, leastways that's what's left of him. The boys is laughin' at him all on account of a perfectly nachul mistake." Uncle Beck squared himself about for a narrative, and the crowd smiled expectantly—all except the mossy-looking, bow-legged figure on the molasses barrel. He dropped his head sheepishly.

"You see hit was this a-way," continued the old man after he had made sure of an attentive audi-

ence: "Shan had been mopin' round here kinder lopsided for weeks, an' he got tur'ble skeered he had caught the blind staggers, so I up an' diagnosed him. I found hit to be a clear case o' bile, so I told him to take jes p'intedly what I told you. Now Shan didn't have no dime piece, but he had the change for hit, an' he follered the perscription accordin' to the best of his lights."

"An' they do say hit larnt him a lesson," broke in one of the listeners.

"Wa-al, Shan ain't no scholard yit, but, by gosh, he knows the diff'rence 'tween a dime an' two nickles, all right! Say, Shan, hit ain't sence you took the calomel that you 'fused to send Tony to look for a bee-tree on the right-hand side o' the big road 'cause he was left-handed, is it?"

"Uncle Beck, you haven't answered my question yet." Mary Elizabeth stepped forward, and purposely diverted the attention of the laughing group from the shamefaced figure on the molasses barrel.

"Your question? Land save us! What question, child?"

"Did White-faced Silas leave any children?" Again a momentary quiet fixed the group, then Uncle Beck drawled with deliberation:

"Did White-face Silas leave any children?' you say. '*Leave children!*' Wa-al, child, all I got to say is that the only offspring Silas was harborin' endurin' my knowledge of him was seven devils, an' hit's mostly considered hereabouts that he took them with him when he left."

The unusual sound of a brisk, light step on the porch attracted everybody's attention, and Mary Elizabeth turned to see a smug-faced young man, clad in an impertinently new "store-bought" suit and wearing a bright-red tie, strut in.

"Well, old cuckle-burr, got anything fit for me to eat this mornin'?" he demanded.

Uncle Beck grew reflective as a roll of bills was ostentatiously spread out on the counter, but a black-browed native plucked the store-keeper by the coat and said distinctly:

"Beck, thar's a sack o' new oats out thar on my wagin."

The young man opened his mouth, but shut it again, and turned to the proprietor, at the same time laying a queer, antiquated-looking pistol on the counter in front of him.

"I keep this as a kinder little souvenir," he said. "My grandfather carried it in the war, and I always like to show it to my friends."

Uncle Beck quieted the crowd with a swift glance, and then said, with cheerful interest, as he adjusted his spectacles and leaned over the weapon:

"Carried it in the war, did he? Lord, but hit ain't no wonder we got licked! Now, sonny, 'souvenirs' is valu'ble an' oughtn't to be left layin' around. You jes put this one back in your jeans—hit'll be safer."

The young bully caught the full meaning of the other's straight look and followed his advice, if a trifle slowly. Then the others began to talk among

themselves with quiet restraint, Mary Elizabeth watching both groups with her heart in her mouth. After about ten minutes' bargaining, however, in which he proved the mettle of both Uncle Beck's and the stable-boy's patience, the aggressive newcomer grew loquacious again.

"What's them new-fangled lookin' slats?" he demanded, as a drove of lean, long-snouted hogs came squealing up to the side door.

"Them, sonny? Them's 'razor-backs.' We call 'em that 'cause they're sharp enough to keep out o' trouble."

"And what in hell-and-high-water do you keep 'em for?"—He was plainly determined to be disagreeable.

Uncle Beck scratched the scant beard under his chin, and replied with childlike blandness:

"We—we keeps 'em to fight with, sonny."

"The distinguishin' trait of a hog o' *that* kind is that *he's* middlin' polite." It was the black-browed native speaking again. Mary Elizabeth sent a glance over the man's powerful frame and set face, and decided that here was a man who would make a dangerous enemy.

"Who is he?" she whispered to the boy.

"Who, him? That's Trav Williams, an' he don't take nothin' off'n nobody," was the comforting reply.

"Are you going to live here?" Mary Elizabeth asked the question as an excuse to come forward and stand between Trav Williams and the reckless new-

comer, for there was ominous silence between them.

"What?" exclaimed the young fellow, taking her in from head to foot with a stare of impertinent approval. "No, ma'am, I'll be through here to-morrow—then me for Birmingham, and the boys can have the scenery to himself!"

"Is *he* lookin' for trouble?" The query came from Trav Williams.

"Well, don't you give yourself no uneasiness. If he is, he's the stuff to find it all right, all right."

"Will you get my horse for me? I see she has strayed off."

"Charmed, miss!" The bully forgot his brewing quarrel in his gallantry, and was soon at cooling distance, out in the open, leading the captured Sulphurina to the edge of the porch.

Uncle Beck followed Mary Elizabeth to her mount, and as they went she whispered:

"Make him go home, hear!"

"I will, child, an' you are wuth your weight in Arbuckle's coffee." When she was comfortably seated on Sulphurina's broad back with her foot in the stirrup, she looked straight into the old man's clear eyes and asked:

"Uncle Beck, what made you all look at each other so quickly when I asked about White-face Silas?"

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth"—and his tone was at once a protest and a caress—"hit weren't to say exactly 'proper' for a young woman to be astin' questions about ha'nts."

The girl leaned forward and placed her hand firmly on his shoulder.

"Don't you know you can't fool me?" she demanded.

"La, honey, I've fooled likelier gals than you." Then seriously: "Now look a-here, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, you go home an' stop 'maginin' 'bout things you ain't got nothin' to do with. Ef White-face Silas air a proper subject for you to be talkin' 'bout, he certainly ain't a popular one, so you keep your mouth off'n him.—Child," he continued more gently, "jes because your Uncle Beck don't want you mixin' up with things that wouldn't do you no good, ain't no sign he wouldn't fight for you ef you needed him." A laughing call from the store broke in, and Uncle Beck dismissed her with:

"Good-by, gal; take care o' yourself."

Sulphurina became brisk and cheerful as soon as she was headed toward home, but her good spirits were quickly dashed, for the young rider suddenly took a crotchety notion and fairly dragged her into a rocky bridle-path that led almost straight up the flanking hill. "Stony Lonesome" was by no means an easy ascent for an old mare to climb, nor did its forest-clad sides offer any sort of trail that a young woman riding alone should elect to follow; but Mary Elizabeth had lost something the other day, over the summit yonder, and she now suddenly decided to go in quest of it.

Past the mountain crest and half-way down its farther side, and the girl reined in her horse be-

fore all she had ever known as "home." It was a little tumbled-down, deserted log cabin clinging to and subsiding against the gray, crumbling rocks of the hillside, and nearly swallowed up by a rank growth of heaven trees and pokeberry bushes. Judging by appearances, it partly grew and partly happened—a sort of fungous thing, a product of the gray rottenness all around.

How had the change been wrought? Once its door-way was wide and welcoming, its black rafters were high, high overhead. Once there was a sense of bigness and dignity and freedom here. Now—now—had the very portal shrunk? And could a man stand upright beneath that low, mean roof? It wasn't fair! It wasn't fair! Memory had broken her promise. The very mountains—they that erstwhile stood for the sublime, the unattainable—had by some heartbreaking black magic been transformed into low, commonplace hills. Lost! Lost!—the illusions of childhood—and never to be recalled!

The girl urged her horse back along the path she could no longer see, unmindful now whether Sulphurina stumbled over bowlders that might have been avoided, or plunged knee-deep into leafy drifts of color, nearly flinging her from the saddle.

She was young, and nobody had ever told her that the only way to keep the past is to turn one's back to it and resolutely face the future.

"Aren't you riding pretty recklessly?"

Mary Elizabeth hastily brushed the hot tears from before her vision, and saw, sitting idly on a splendid

bay horse as if taking a survey of the scene, the stranger tenant of the haunted house.

He was regarding her amusedly as Sulphurina stumbled toward him, but a surer look into her face seemed to embarrass him.

"I beg your pardon," he said courteously, as he made room for her to pass.

Sulphurina pursued her stubborn way, headed homeward now, and had gone several lengths beyond him when the girl, realizing that she had not answered the stranger's question, looked back.

"May I come?" he asked, interpreting her backward glance, and the next minute he was riding beside her. When he at last got his steed's mettlesome gait reined in to suit Sulphurina's plodding, the stranger ventured, but with very apparent diffidence:

"Let me tell you something. I'm going to rack and ruin here with nothing to do. Now, if you could manage to use me, if you would let me help you—in anything that troubled you, you know, it would be a positive charity to me. It really would."

If he had said anything else under the sun, Mary Elizabeth could have kept her grip, but everybody had failed her this morning, and—she dropped the bridle on the horse's neck and covered her face with her hands.

"Why, child, what is it? Don't, don't cry!" He laid one hand on Sulphurina's mane to stay her straying steps and leaned forward toward the sobbing girl.

"What is it?" he urged.

"Oh, nothing, nothing—just *everything*," Mary Elizabeth sobbed.

"Well, it's a burning shame, that's what it is. The idea of condemning a girl like you to *this*! And that's 'philanthropy'! If I had my way I'd string up every carping sentimentalist in the bunch."

"*Don't!*" she suddenly surprised herself with. "I mustn't let you talk that way. You don't appreciate—you and I don't appreciate what he tried to do!"

There was a slight surprise in the eyes of the stranger as he answered:

"Oh, well, if you say so. But you can't stand this. It's inhuman, besides it isn't practicable, and it isn't safe. The thing for you to do is to go home."

"I haven't any home."

"Yes, yes, I remember. But why not get you a job within the limits of civilization?"

"Because, because, somehow I belong to Mr. Fenwick, and must do what he says till I can buy myself back from him by paying him what he has spent on me."

"Now, if you only had some piece of property that would——"

The girl looked at him quickly, forgetful of her wet lashes.

"There's a place here that was my father's," she said. "I have always thought I would sell it and pay Mr. Fenwick and be free of all this. But——"

"Well, by George, there are possibilities here, do you know! Where is the land?"

"Over there," and her face lighted with excited expectancy as she pointed over the crest of the hill.

"Oh, beyond the ridge! Well, I'm afraid not," and the interest died out of his voice. He didn't seem to see the look of heartbreak that swept over her face at his answer, but, all the same, he took the course that was best calculated to dispel it.

"Come," he suggested, "let's ride along the summit. The scenery is quite pretty in places." If his intention was to divert her, he succeeded flatteringly as they threaded their way along the indistinct trail, and talked of many things.

Mary Elizabeth's long experience under the dragon-like chaperonage of a girls' boarding-school had but served to heighten her natural curiosity in regard to the proscribed sex, and she enjoyed to the full this first perfectly free intercourse with a being who seemed to take a firmer, more vital, hold than herself on everything, and yet to be able to sympathize with her. Mary Elizabeth decided that she liked

"Look," he suddenly exclaimed, as they came out on a bald knob that commanded a view of the whole narrow valley.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she assented.

"Oh, yes, quite pretty, but see that ridge over yonder? Now follow that line of hills—see? They make a perfect cup of this vale of woe of ours; and the only break in the rim at all is there to the left,

where Deer Creek tumbles out into the world. By George, it's the prettiest proposition I ever got my hands on!"

The girl turned from the "pretty proposition" to wonder at the change in the man. The quiet self-possession, the almost cold reserve of his wonted manner had vanished. If there had been anything to cause excitement, Mary Elizabeth would have suspected the stranger of some such emotion. His cheek was flushed, his voice enthusiastic, his eyes were shining like a prophet's at the thing he saw.

Her gaze followed the direction of his powerful outstretched arm again, and she said, wistfully:

"Yes, and it's so peaceful. They are happy there because they have never been torn from their proper setting. Peace like that ought to go undisturbed forever."

"Are you talking about these blooming natives?"

"Yes."

"Well, excuse me! I'd like to—" he didn't say what.

Suddenly the scene at the cross-roads store came back to the girl, weighted with portentousness.

"Mr. Marshall," she broke in, "you gave me a piece of advice the other day. I wonder if you'll take a little from me."

"You didn't take mine."

"Why—I——"

"Resist the impulse!" he banteringly interrupted. "Now, as a matter of fact, you have walked home

from school alone twice since then—yesterday and the day before."

"How do you know?"

"A friend of yours loafed around the vicinity of the worst part of your route to see that the lonesomeness didn't get you."

A flush of pleasure crept up the girl's pale cheek. This also was a nice characteristic of the proscribed sex—this instinct to protect.

"I didn't know that I had a friend," she said softly.

"You have, or you haven't, as you yourself elect. If you will take me on my own recommendation, I shall appreciate being allowed to be your friend." He was leaning toward her as he spoke. Mary Elizabeth regarded him with open-eyed, frank speculation for a moment, then looked to the distant hills for the inspiration of an answer. After some embarrassing minutes, however, she turned to him, still perplexed.

"I—I—beg your pardon, but there don't seem to be any standards I can lay hold of," she returned.

"You see, I have been in a boarding-school all my life, and, you know, this would be very improper at the seminary."

"You roomed with the matron, didn't you?"

The girl's eyes questioned him again, then flashed suddenly.

"No, I'm not sissy, either, if I *did* room with Miss Belle, and I'm perfectly able to do my own thinking, thank you!"

"Why, of course, of course!" He rubbed his hand over his mouth thoughtfully, and veiled his eyes from her indignant glance. Mary Elizabeth had just decided that he was not smiling behind his hand, when he said in a flattering, conciliating tone:

"If I had remembered the independence of your people, I should have known that you would do your own thinking."

A red glow spread over her smooth white skin, and the girl said, with pleased, hesitating embarrassment:

"I'm sure it's all right for us to be friends."

"Thank you!" he said quickly, and she flushed again with pleasure as he uncovered his head.

Mary Elizabeth suddenly remembered something. "Since we are friends," she urged, "you'll listen to my advice." Then, without any other preface, she told him of the incident she had just witnessed at the store, leaving out not a single detail, and warning him against incurring the ill-will of the natives. The man listened in grave, attentive silence, and thanked her very genuinely, when she had finished.

"Who is that man?" she queried.

"Why, in real life he's my chauffeur. I brought him here as man-of-all-work, but I seem to have made a mistake."

"You certainly have, and the sooner you get rid of him, the better it will be."

"He has already served notice on me that he's going to leave to-morrow, and I shan't try to detain him."

"You'll miss him, won't you?"

"Yes, he's a fair cook, but I've lived on light-bread and ants before."

Mary Elizabeth was suddenly impelled to ask a strangely frank question:

"You, yourself—you are friendly to them, aren't you?"

The girl shrank inwardly as he stripped the bright leaves from a sumac bough with a sudden cut of his riding-whip.

"I don't care *that* for them!" he said. "Say, let's go to the falls, will you? There's a short cut through here."

But the girl laid a quick hand on his bridle.

"No, no," she said with concern, "not that way; that's the graveyard, and we'd be sure to trample some of the graves."

"And would that be 'bad luck'?" He smiled teasingly.

"No, it would be desecration," she said. He turned his horse's head and followed her down a path of her own choosing.

At the crossing of another bridle-path they came suddenly face to face with a rusty-looking native, mounted on a "flea-bit" mule. It was Babe Davis. Mary Elizabeth gave him a friendly greeting, but he hardly murmured a response as he took the flank-ing bushes to let them pass.

"Your friend didn't seem very glad to see you," remarked her companion, after they had passed. "Look yonder. He has stopped stock-still to gaze

after you!" But Mary Elizabeth didn't look, and after a little, Babe Davis and the incident were far behind them.

At the falls they dismounted, and John Marshall tethered their horses to the bushes and began to blaze their way to the best coign of vantage. Mary Elizabeth found a strange new delight in his masculine attitude of eagerness to serve. It was fun climbing down the cliff, supported at one moment and lifted bodily down at the next, and arriving on the table-rock fresh and unscratched, while this creature who took everything on himself showed the stain and strain of the double toil but actually seemed to enjoy it.

"Don't you wish you were a girl?" she asked, when he had safely landed her.

"Good Lord, *no!*"

He held her while she leaned far over the ledge for a view of the falls. Directly beneath her gaze the billowy white veil made a sheer drop of fifty feet and seethed and boiled in the lake below.

"Oh, it's beautiful—awful!" she exclaimed, retreating.

"Twenty thousand horse-power at least."

Mary Elizabeth looked at him wonderingly, but he failed to see the questioning surprise with which she regarded him. He was leaning over the cataract now, gazing down the ever-falling flood, and his eyes were narrow and intent. After a little he turned to her:

"Look there," he exclaimed, taking in with a

sweeping gesture the narrow chasm; "this is the only break in the hill-line, and it could be dammed for a song."

"Don't you admire beauty?"

He turned from contemplation of their surroundings and swept her with a glance from her crown of wind-blown curls to the bows on her shoes, and back again to the level of her proud, shrinking glance.

"Exceedingly!" he said with emphasis.

Mary Elizabeth all at once had a feeling that his eyes were less courteous than the rest of him, and she concluded she had been a little hasty in her decision about liking men. For the first time during their interview, the girl realized that she was alone in the woods with a perfectly strange man. With a sudden accession of dignity she inquired the time. . . . It was one o'clock—an hour after Aunt Millie's dinner time! Mary Elizabeth paled.

"I must go home at once," she exclaimed. "Oh, what made me do this! She'll be furious."

They made a hasty return to their horses, and took the shortest way home. The stranger was so attentive on the way, and so confessedly repentant for having laid her liable to a berating from Aunt Millie, that they were quite sympathetic friends before the journey ended. As they came out into the "big road," he said in the tone of one who is conveying pleasant news:

"I'm coming to visit the school soon."

"Oh, no you are not!" she protested. "I—I

mean *please don't*, I'd be so embarrassed—I don't know how to teach."

"Then you need supervising."

"I don't care if I do. You shan't come, you hear?"

"It's a public school."

"I know it is—but——"

"Well, I'm one of the public."

"I don't care if you are, you haven't any children to send to school."

"How do you know I haven't?"

Mary Elizabeth was left with her mouth open, and the stranger was looking at her with a perfectly grave face. An opportune bend in the road disclosed the Davis cabin in the dim distance, and Mary Elizabeth reined in her horse.

"Do you know," she said deprecatingly, "I believe I'd rather you wouldn't come any farther—these people are so——"

"The world we have always with us? Not here, surely—but if you'd rather I wouldn't——" His eyes were frankly amused as he held his hat in his hand and reined his horse back for her to pass; then he turned rein and took a bridle-path that led sharply to the left.

Mary Elizabeth and Sulphurina followed the main woodland road with a stolid deliberateness, but hardly a hundred or so yards had been accomplished by the mare when her rider suddenly jerked her back almost to her haunches. Something was running through the underbrush!

Anybody in the world but Sulphurina would have shied at this juncture, for the sharp crack of a nearby rifle suddenly split the air, and the next minute some half-dozen young men leaped, scrambled, or fell over the rail fence that bounded one of the flanking stretches of woodland, dragging what Mary Elizabeth vaguely guessed to be instruments for surveying.

"Over the fence is out'!" laughed one of them.
"Gee, but I'll not give him another crack at me!"

"*Duck! He's loading again!*" exclaimed one of them excitedly, and before the astonished girl could realize what had happened, the whole party had scurried across the road right in front of her, pitched over the opposite fence, and lost themselves in an overgrown ravine immediately beyond.

Mary Elizabeth startled Sulphurina into a hard trot with a shower of cuts from her switch, for, from out the bushes some distance up the opposing slope, had looked the sinister face of Trav Williams.

CHAPTER III

ON the Monday afternoon following her visit to the store Mary Elizabeth took occasion to walk home from school with the Thaggin children to see what could be done toward getting parental co-operation in her struggles to control and teach them. There were five of them, muddy-faced, but stubbornly independent young souls withal. Mary Elizabeth, clear-faced, but stubborn and independent in much the same degree, walked with them now, and wondered if she could hope for help from the mother of such a brood.

The girl was too young to see that the qualities of character which made these children hard to conquer were the very qualities which made her, the teacher, determined to rule her little kingdom. She was too inexperienced to realize that this spirit of independence, so universally characteristic of the hill type and, in these youngsters, so aggressively insistent for positive expression, was the trait that, within herself, willingly sacrificed the outward semblance of freedom to its substantial, ultimate triumph.

In order to win back her independence, she must repay her benefactor, must "be even with him"; and in spite of her wild, rebel heart, a higher something within moved her to accede to his terms, if

with a grim submissiveness. She would not only stay here until she had paid back every dollar that she owed him, but she would do well the work to which he had condemned her. And again there stirred within her memory of him that indefinable something that was strangely akin to pain. Then, thanks to a drifting wood scent, the scene changed: She was being lifted down to the table-rock again, and the arms that held her were strong and reassuring. If there had been anything in that woodland interview which had been unwelcome at the time, that drifting scent of sweetgum failed to conjure it up with the rest, and only the charm of the episode remained.

But it had had its sequel, and the sequel didn't turn out happily. Not even her sensitive imagination had adequately pictured Aunt Millie's wrath at her over-late home-coming. She had hoped desperately that the old woman would not find out where she had spent the morning, but hope had betrayed her. Babe had asked at the supper table whom it was she was riding to the falls with that noon, and she had been forced to answer with the name of the distrusted stranger. The girl turned cold now as she recalled the effect of her words. Bud had deliberately laid down the knife with which he had been shovelling in his food and looked at her so long and so searchingly that she had risen precipitately and taken refuge in her own room where only the tones of Aunt Millie's high-pitched, angry voice could follow.

Suddenly the children opened full cry at sight of home, and Mary Elizabeth came out of her bitter reminiscences, back to the more cheerful present.

Judged by outward appearances, the Thaggin home was a pleasant enough place to visit. They had arrived at the bars now, and the children were lowering them for the teacher to pass in. What would have been a lawn of blue-grass in another stage of civilization, was here a stretch of ripened corn and pumpkins and cow-peas, but the prospect was not unpleasing.

The promise of plenty lent a certain homely beauty of its own to the surroundings, and a fresh coat of whitewash on the big double log cabin differentiated it from the typical dwelling of those parts and made it stand out in almost manorial dignity.

If the girl had been the Pied Piper of Hamelin, she might have been prepared for the sudden irruption of tow-headed youngsters which broke out all over the place in celebration of her advent; but as it was, she was fairly taken aback as some seven or eight she had never before laid eyes on appeared on the scene, calling variously to each other:

"Run here, Ginny, run!"

"Here's de teacher!"

"That's hei, see her?"

In the tone of one calling off the dogs, a woman's voice silenced the bedlam, and the next minute a large, gingham-clad, uncorseted woman filled the door-way.

"Come in, miss, come in," she said cordially.

"You'uns is the teacher. ain't you? Wa-al, I'm Mis' Thaggin."

"Yes, I'm Miss Dale, but I want to see *Mrs.* Thaggin, please. May I?"

"That's me. I'm her." Whereon Mary Elizabeth was fain to accept the fact that the ample lady before her was the mother of this large and enterprising family of children, and not the virgin soul her mispronunciation of her own title would seem to indicate. Mary Elizabeth recalled the stupid, ineffectual creature she had seen seated on Uncle Beck's molasses barrel, and wondered and shuddered that such a man should be the father of children.

The room into which she was ushered was freshly whitewashed inside, and the rough board floor was clean. The two ample bedsteads, in opposite corners, were provided with immense feather mattresses which had been beaten to a stiff froth, and which now bellied out under flaming bed-quilts of the basket and rising-sun patterns. From the pillows "Good-night" and "Good-morning" greeted the visitor in tones of turkey-red.

A hollow cough from the chimney-side insinuated a discord into the healthful harmony, and Mary Elizabeth's attention was attracted to a slight wraith of a woman who lay back limply in a homespun-covered barrel chair, but who kept a pair of piercingly bright eyes fixed inquiringly on her.

"That's Shan's ma; she's got the consumption," said the one who had invited her in; and as the girl went over to the sick woman and extended her

hand kindly, the hostess added: "Ma, this is the chillun's teacher."

Instantly the old face hardened. "Who? Her that was——?"

"Hush, ma! What you want to be rakin' up old trouble for?" She shut up the old woman as effectually as if she had slapped her in the mouth, and proceeded to dust with her apron a chair for the visitor, while she asked: "How you an' the chillun gittin' on?"

It was the cue Mary Elizabeth wanted, and with only a fleeting wonder at the sick woman's portentous, if half-expressed, question, she turned to the other. It was no easy matter to perform the mission on which she had come, but it was one way of keeping faith with the grave-eyed memory that was now almost ever-present with her, and Mary Elizabeth went straight to the duty she saw before her. She delivered a round, unvarnished tale of the various shortcomings of the various young Thaggins, and then outlined her hopes for them and her need of parental help.

The mother of the children felt the sincerity of the story and followed it with a mother's apprehensions and a mother's hopes.

"I want 'em to do right, Miss Dale," she said when Mary Elizabeth had finished. "I can't make out what makes 'em so pesky—whether hit's jes nach'l-born meanness or worms, but I'll wear 'em all to a frazzle to-night an' give 'em a copperas pill apiece, an'——"

"They're very good chillun, *considerin'*——" The

old woman stopped, but whether in apprehension of another extinguishing "hush," or whether she had finished her sentence, Mary Elizabeth was left to guess.

"You, Tony! what you doin' to that thar cat?" the mother suddenly interjected as a feline screech came from the back porch.

"I'm turnin' her a-loose, ma!"

"Wa-al, sto it this minute!" she bawled, from sheer force of habit. In looking away to hide a smile, Mary Elizabeth glanced out of the window to where a bright-faced girl was ploughing a nearby patch.

"Who is that pretty girl out yonder?" she queried, turning quickly to Mrs. Thaggin.

"That's my Sue, ma'am. She's the oldes' an' likelies' one o' the lot."

The teacher was interested at once. "Why don't you send her to school, Mrs. Thaggin?"

"Why, she's been to school."

"When?"

"Sue went six weeks this summer. That was before you come."

"Oh, yes, but six weeks is only a beginning. She needs more."

"Sue's a very smart gal, considerin'." This time there was a plain period after the "considerin'."

But the younger woman was again speaking:

"Why, I couldn't spare Sue in the fall, ma'am; she's the best field-hand on the place. That's the trouble 'bout this new-fangled law, miss. As long as we had jes a six-weeks school in summer hit didn't

pester nobody, an' we didn't mind lettin' the chil-lun go. But seven months a-settin' 'round in a school-house doin' nothin' is jes ruination."

"A-l'arnin' that the world turns round ever' day, —an' that thar lot gate a-facin' the north for forty year——!"

"Hush, ma, now who said anything about the lot gate? You air the beat'nes—" but such a violent fit of coughing from the invalid set in, that the daughter-in-law was fain to leave her arraignment unfinished.

"What do you do for her?" asked the teacher, in genuine sympathy.

"Nothin', miss; they ain't nothin' to do for her. She's jes perishin' away. Shan throwed away a lot o' money buyin' physic till the doctor told him she couldn't git well; an' then he seen hit were a pure waste an' stopped hit."

Mary Elizabeth caught her breath at the primitive, brutal philosophy, but she forced her voice to be even as she asked:

"Yes, but doesn't it relieve her suffering some?"

"Hit sho' do, miss,"—from the invalid—"Dr. Beach's Consumption Kyore."

"Hush, ma, hit didn't do nothin' but make your coughin' easier! Shan ain't got money to burn."

Mary Elizabeth got up deliberately and walked to the mantel-shelf. From among countless small tools, out-of-date calendars, medicine phials, and the like, she singled out an empty bottle labeled, "Dr. Beach's Consumption Cure."

"Is this what helps you?" she asked directly of the invalid. The old creature was coughing again, but there was a ray of hope in her submerged black eyes and she nodded affirmatively though her frame shook. "I'll take this with me for the name, and get you some more," said the girl, gently.

"La, miss—" the younger woman was objecting querulously, when she was suddenly quieted with:

"For God's sake let her!" The next moment the hungry black eyes were searching the girl's face again, distrustful, yet hoping desperately, too.

"Hit do be ra-al generous of you, miss—"

A chord deep down in the girl's nature somewhere snapped. "It is not I who am generous," she said. "A man—a very good man—'way off from here will pay for it; he has already paid." She said good-by hastily, and would have hurried on her journey, but the younger Mrs. Thaggin followed her out, ostensibly to let down the bars, but really, to get in a little more chat before letting the visitor escape her.

"Have you'uns heerd any talk over to Mis' Davis's about that thar strange young man what's took up at the ha'nted house?" she queried.

"Why, yes, some," replied the girl while her pulse quickened; "but they don't seem to know anything about him, for certain."

"No, an' nobody don't; but Shan 'lowed they was gittin' onto him, he thought. Do you know," and she lowered her voice to the tone of confidence, "the men hereabouts thinks he's a counterfeiter!"

Mary Elizabeth's heart gave a great bound and then stood still a moment, till the other added—"Yes, ma'am, Shan heerd him with his own years a-tellin' that man of his'n that he could coin money here hand-over-fist."

The life swept back into the girl's face, and she opened her lips to say that she knew the man and that he was all right, when her fatal honesty stopped her. In point of fact, she did not know anything about him. Then a curious, sickening doubt of him insinuated itself into her consciousness, and to escape the pain of it, she said irrelevantly:

"There are only about a half-dozen families living here, aren't there?"

"Yes, miss, hit ain't what hit uster be. Onct nearly the whole valley were took up with farms; but lately—in the last ten year or so—most of the neighbors here have sold out to strangers."

"Well, if the strangers make good neighbors——"

"They haven't none of 'em showed up in these parts at all after buyin', miss.—None but that one at Silas's. An' ef they're all like him, hit's the Lord's mercy they don't come."

Mary Elizabeth turned to go, but she hesitated a moment, and then came back a step or two. "Mrs. Thaggin," she said, "I'm going to come around again and talk to you about Sue, may I?"—The misty evening took on a grave and thoughtful look.

"Why, yes, miss, come whenever you kin," replied her hostess, hospitably.

CHAPTER IV

WHILE Mary Elizabeth and the wife of Shan Thaggin talked together about the stranger in the graying afternoon, the subject of their conversation dismounted from his horse at the cross-roads store, and, hunting-dog at heel, entered its hospitable portal.

The place was quiet, almost deserted, for Monday afternoon was no time for farmers to loaf. The stable-boy clerk was fulfilling the first of his offices out in the tin-can district at the back of the store. Only Uncle Beck remained to tell the story, and he was plainly nodding over the latest edition of "Hos-tetter's Almanac."

When John Marshall and his magnificent pointer came in out of the crisping evening to share the warmth of the little rusty stove, mine host at once roused himself to the duties of his position. The proffer of the surest-legged chair, a vigorous punching down of ashes, and the right of way through a large plug of tobacco at once showed that he was thoroughly awake and on his job.

Both chair and tobacco were declined, however, and the stranger stood leisurely by the counter while he traded for some half-dozen articles in which he evinced strangely little interest. Nevertheless, he talked pleasantly enough about the weather, the prospects for a cold winter, and about the neighbor-

hood in general, saying some kindly things about some of the people whom he had met here. It seemed perfectly natural, after his desultory buying was finished, that he and Uncle Beck should pull up chairs to the glowing stove and drift into a little neighborly gossip.

"A lot of waste land about here," the stranger ventured, after he had duly asked about the condition of the store-keeper's crops; "I wonder you don't get rid of some of it."

"Wa-al, land ain't apt to run off nowhar, an' hit don't git in nobody's way, so to speak," answered the native.

"Yes, but money is right handy sometimes," replied the stranger, "and maybe a little more of that and a little less land would be right good for some of you. Now I, for instance," and he drew his chair a trifle nearer that of his listener, "I, for instance, happen to have a little more money than I have any immediate use for, and to be really in need of some good mountain land. I would take it as a neighborly act if you would help me get some good acreage here for a fair price. Do you happen to know of any for sale, or any that the owner might be induced to sell if a fair offer were made for it?"

"You can have anything I got, for the money."

"This building, for instance?"

"Wa-al, no. This here store ra-ally belongs to Trav Williams. I'm jes rentin' from him. But I've got a farm over the ridge thar what's the best corn land on the mountains——"

"Over the ridge?" quoted the stranger. "Well, I'm more taken with the property here in the valley. I don't believe I care for that that lies outside."

"Wa-al, that place what you air livin' on——"

"Yes?" said the stranger, and he leaned forward slightly.

"Oh—nothin'—nothin'," the old man replied, as if he had suddenly changed his mind about something, and he addressed himself to punching down the ashes again.

"What about it?" the stranger's even voice insisted.

"Why, the owner ain't thinkin' o' sellin' it. Besides, nothin' good ain't never comin' outen that place."

For some reason the native did not follow the subject further, and a few moments of silence ensued between the two; then Uncle Beck said, questioningly:

"You seem to be doin' your own tradin' these days. Your man with the swell red tie ain't been in to see us of late."

"No," replied the other, "he was a quarrelsome fellow and I didn't like his attitude toward my neighbors here, so I let him go. But how did you know he was my man?"

"I seen him with *him* several times," he nodded toward the pointer which had approached and now stood looking worshipfully up into his master's eyes.

"Yes, I didn't like the association," the visitor

said, whimsically, as he gently pulled the long brown ears of the pointer. "Lightfoot is a gentleman," he continued, patting the subject of his encomium on the head, "and I don't like him to have any such companions."

"You call him 'Lightfoot'?"

"You just ought to see him at work!"

"He's got fine eyes, stranger."

"Yes, yes, he has that! A friend of mine painted him."

"Wa-al, by gum! What did you let him do him that a-way for? The man ain't livin' what could play a mean trick on my Sloucher, an' he's jes one o' these cur dogs at that."

"Oh, I mean he painted a picture to look like him. No, indeed, the man that interferes with Lightfoot will have two of us to lick, won't he, boy?" The splendid creature seemed to understand and to agree to the compact, for he pushed yet closer and laid his head on his master's knee.

"I like to see a fellow that can look you in the eye like this—" the stranger spoke reflectively as if he were thinking beyond his hearer. "That picture-painting fellow says that there is bound to be something wonderfully good in store for Lightfoot in his next existence—that there will have to be made up to him then what his limitations have denied him in this."

"Stranger, that sounds like Ma'y 'Lizabeth."

"May who? Oh, you mean the little teacher—yes—what about her?"

"Why, Ma'y 'Lizbeth she's got that notion 'bout things bein' 'made up' to us, proned into her good and strong. Hit wan't two days ago that she got ra-al worked up a-talkin' to me 'bout Jake Windham's peg-leg an' a-sayin' that when we was denied blessin's here, w'd git jes that much more after we was dead an' gone." The stranger was looking directly at him as he spoke—"An' I up an' told her," continued the store-keeper, enjoying his new audience, "that I didn't in no wise b'lieve what she was a-tellin' me. Wa-al, at that she got kinder hurtlike, an' said she wouldn't a' b'lieved hit o' me—for all the world like I had been stealin' hogs! An' she up an' ast me ef I didn't b'lieve we was goin' to have our blessin's multiplied in heaven." The narrator took his own time in the telling and chuckled deliberately as he progressed. "An' then I explained to her that I didn't see how Jake could find a use for *three* legs, even in heaven—but Lord, stranger, Ma'y 'Lizbeth couldn't see a joke with one o' them surveyin' spy-glasses." He was tilted back in his chair laughing quizzically at his own wit and heartily enjoying having the stranger laugh with him. The mutual appreciation of the little touch of humor swept away the cloud of constraint and reserve that had hitherto hovered between them and the two men suddenly found themselves on a new footing.

"We mustn't expect too much of women," said the stranger after his hearty laugh had subsided. Then he continued, as if a new thought had struck him: "Speaking of surveyors, Mr. Logan, it seems

that you people out here don't like them. I heard that this man, Williams, chased a party of them off his land with a gun the other day."

"That's the word that's been goin' about, stranger, an' I wouldn't be surprised ef hit was true. Trav ain't the man to take nothin' off'n nobody, you know."

"But you see," broke in the other, "it is a sort of unwritten law of progress that surveyors may go on any man's land."

"Hit may be a law of progress, mister, but hit ain't Trav's law; an'—" here he gave a shrewd look at the other under his heavy brows—"an' ef you happen to have any interest in them surveyors—say friendly interest, bein' all strangers here alike—I'd advise 'em agin another move in that direction. You kin even tell 'em that a certain simple-minded old store-keeper says that hit don't make so much diff'rence 'bout breakin' 'laws of progress' an' even state laws in these parts, but hit wouldn't be healthy for 'em to disregard none o' Trav Williams's rules an' regulations."

"But will your public opinion support any such dogged narrowness as that?" He either did not catch or purposely disregarded the other's covert suggestion.

"We'uns air all hill-Billies together, stranger."

"But don't your people want development? Don't they want railroads to come into this section, and towns to be built here? Don't they want to see factories put up——?"

"Wa-al, I ain't heerd none of 'em expressin' no sich wants, stranger. Some of us wouldn't know what to do with a town ef we had one, an' as for railroads—why even a peg-leg will take a hill-Billy as far from home as he's got any business a-goin'; leastways, that's the way most of 'em looks at it."

"Well, you wouldn't mind telling me how you happen to know that they feel this way, would you?"

"Change your mind an' take a chaw, mister—you won't? Wa-al, ever' man to his likens—that's our creed here. Now as to how I know, stranger, I wasn't caught outen the woods for nothin', you know. Sixty-nine year is a long enough time to git one notion sot in your head, you see. Besides that, I've seen 'em tried. Thar've been strangers here before your time, mister, astin' these self-same questions. Thar've been other men a-lookin' for much-needed lands—valley lands preferred—an' they, too, had more money than was quite comfortable to keep."

"And your people went up outrageously on the price of their lands, and then refused to sell. Didn't they?"

"Why, who's been a-tellin' you?"

"Nobody, but I've traded for lands in hill districts myself."

"Oh, you have? Wa-al, you ain't quite right 'bout this little siterwation here. A lot of our people did sell some years ago, and moved over in Walker. We heerd a lot o' talk then 'bout how prosp'rous this region was a-goin' to be ef we would all only give

up an' move off'n the face o' creation. Wa-al, some of us wouldn't move. We thought that ef thar was a good thing a-comin' this way we'd like to be on the spot to welcome hit. That was nearly ten year ago, stranger, an' prosperity ain't showed up in these diggin's yit. A lot o' our neighbors air gone, but their lands haven't never been in noways improved, an' the pine thickets air takin' the valley, except for the few spots that a half-dozen of us helt onto agin the comin' o' progress."

The stranger seemed politely attentive, so he continued: "Hit might interest you to know that I've had three offers for this property of Trav's here in the last five year, an' ever' time money was no consideration. Ever' time, too"—here he looked directly into the unflinching eyes of the stranger—"I've offered to sell 'em my own place jest over the ridge thar, an' ever' time hit didn't seem to exactly suit."

"Well, it might interest you to know, Mr. Logan, that your experience with your property about here isn't at all unusual at this day and time. There is a wave of progress sweeping over Alabama that is reaching to the most remote portions of it, and your people need not suspect anything sinister just because they are beginning to feel the influence of the general industrial upheaval." At that moment a booted and spurred mountaineer came rattling in for some farm supplies, and the stranger rose to go. "I should like to talk further with you about this matter, some time, Mr. Logan," he said, holding out his hand in a winningly friendly manner. "And,

say, if the little school-teacher holds out in her determination to give Windham an extra underpinning in the next world, I believe I wouldn't interfere. You have to humor women and children, you know." The flattering reference to his pet joke, and the warm handshake, brought out the invitation from the store-keeper:

"Drap aroun' to see me agin, Mr. Marshall. I like to talk to you, sir, I like to talk to you."

CHAPTER V

It was afternoon recess time of the next day, and Mary Elizabeth had been called down to the school spring to avert a tragedy—"Billy Williams was going to kill the spring lizard," was the exciting message brought her.

Mary Elizabeth knew the terrible portent of such a deed, for her own childhood was not too remote for her to remember that in each spring there dwells a sort of aquatic genius in the shape of a two-legged lizard, to kill which were to cause the drying up of the spring itself.

The young teacher reached the damp, shady dell in time to save the patron lizard and the permanent flow of the water. She was wise enough not to smile, however, as she stopped the threatened vandalism and dispersed the quarrelling children who, shortly called away by another attraction, soon left her to herself in the cool shadows.

After a minute or two she began to be glad that she had come. Half of the recess time was yet unspent, and this looked like an ideal place in which to regain a composure that had suffered a most unusual impairment that morning.

She had just preëmpted a good resting-place on a big flat lime rock, however, when the soothing quiet was broken in upon by the sound of heavy steps. Sure that the ominous tread on the path behind her

was that of a detested visitor who had been at the school all morning, the girl looked steadily in front of her till some one actually sat down beside her, and said, in a voice that she had come to listen for:

"A penny for your thoughts."

John Marshall was treated to a rare smile that vanished almost as quickly as it came, and the girl answered:

"I was thinking how much I should like to kill the county superintendent of education."

"My! But what a little savage it is!" Her hand was resting on the rock beside her, and he laid his own down upon it. A swift, startled look from the girl met an innocent, unsuspecting expression in his eyes. Mary Elizabeth's own glance floundered—clearly he didn't realize his mistake, and she hated to call his attention to it. His thoughts were so far away, however, that it became plain she would have to, so she drew her hand away while a red glow mounted her pale cheek. "You—you—didn't notice."

"Was that *your hand*?"

"Yes, you—a—inadvertently——"

"Oh, I beg ten thousand pardons. I'm such an absent-minded idiot! *Won't* you forgive me?"

Mary Elizabeth accepted his apologetic explanation with a sweet dignity, and soon they were talking of other things.

"You want to kill the county superintendent of education," he reminded her; "wouldn't you better let me do it for you?"

"No, indeed! I want the exquisite pleasure myself."

"All of which is perfectly natural, considering the enormity of his offence—by the way, what is his offence?"

"He's visiting the school to-day."

"Capital!"

Mary Elizabeth looked at him with half-suspicion, and then continued: "He's a big, puffed-up ignoramus that rides around the country pretending to superintend the county schools when he hardly knows how to read and write. He has criticised every single thing I have done to-day"—her listener's countenance took on a genuine sympathy, and the girl continued—"I had a copy of the Sistine Madonna and several illuminated mottoes on the wall, and he took them all down and said I was teaching the children to worship idols. When I asked him to use his influence toward getting the trustees to have the cracks in the wall stopped and glass put in the window so that the cold wind wouldn't come through, he said I was 'pampering' the children."

The sound of a vigorously rung bell brought the girl to her feet instantly. "There!" she exclaimed, "recess is over, and Tony is ringing the bell." She bade the stranger a quick good-by and hurried up the path to the school-house only to find, on her arrival at the door, that he had followed close behind.

"I came to hold him for you while you killed him," he explained.

The children had crowded into the school-room and were noisily disposing themselves on the rough pine benches.

"Where's the victim?" inquired Marshall, putting his head in the door and looking about vainly for something that would answer to the description given him by the indignant little teacher.

"Yonder he comes now," she said.

Marshall turned. A greasy, rusty, but pompous-looking individual was approaching with as much dignity as excessive rotundity would allow.

As Mary Elizabeth presented the school official to the immaculately dressed stranger a look which plainly spelled mortification clouded her earnest eyes.

"Never mind," whispered the stranger, as the two dropped respectfully behind the county superintendent and entered the school-house in his wake, "as a corpse he'll scrub up nicely."

The girl took her stand behind the pine table that answered as teacher's desk, and tremblingly brought the room to order.

The superintendent had ensconced himself in the only chair in the room, so Marshall found himself a place on the end of a little side bench near the teacher's desk. From this coign of vantage his drag-net glance swept the scene and gathered in even the smallest details. It was a big room, the cracks between the logs of which had never been thoroughly chinked. The floor was rough and uneven, and rotting away in places. The one window was a sawed-

out place in the logs, unglazed and with only a rough board blind to shut out the blasts of winter. The only arrangement for heating the room was a huge black fireplace in a mud chimney at the far end. There were no desks, and the children sat side by side on rough pine benches. Marshall counted them—twenty-seven gaunt, blue-legged chickens of the human breed they were—but they were uninteresting, so he turned his wandering gaze to the teacher again.

By this time the girl had herself and her charges in hand. The majority of the children were put to studying, and a class was called. It was the first class in geography—the first, last, and only class in geography. Mary Elizabeth's spirits rose. The lesson consisted of map questions, and both teacher and pupils were especially good on map questions. The subject was South America, but that didn't spell anything. The submerged Atlantis or the Kingdom of Heaven would have done just as well as long as the questions were there in black and white and the answering map was clear and definite in outline and unencumbered by any complicating suggestions of the real thing.

There was "head and foot" to the class. According to custom, the teacher propounded a few questions in review of the previous week's work before beginning the lesson of the day. Five of these were eagerly picked off by the most pushing, the last one of whom had duly nominated Washington as the capital of the United States, when—there really wasn't

any help for it, if a teacher wanted to be honest—Tony Thaggin's time came.

"And where is Washington, Tony?" Surely he couldn't miss it!

"Dead," Tony answered, and there was a finality in his tone that plainly indicated he didn't intend to pursue his subject any further.

There was a dazed look in the boy's eyes as the next chap below disputed his statement, claiming that Washington was still cumbering the ground to the extent of a goodly number of square miles somewhere between Maryland and Virginia. Tony went down sullenly. He was next to foot again. If he heard his teacher's rather impatient explanation, he appeared not to comprehend it.

The county superintendent seemed to see an opportunity here, and broke in with a long-winded disquisition on Washington that seemed to pivot on certain annual packages of seeds from the Department of Agriculture. Mary Elizabeth and the stranger looked at each other. There was desperation in the eyes of one, and cynical amusement in the laughing glance that answered. When the superintendent had delivered himself of a climacteric burst of patriotism, Mary Elizabeth took up the map questions on South America, and all went well until the foot of the class was neared again.

"Tony, what cape is at the southern extremity of South America?" The poor, sympathetic little teacher all but told him in the look that she gave him. "Hush, Jasper, hush!"—this to the eager end-man—"Tony knows, too. Give him time."

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Time! Tony dropped his lower jaw and stared blankly in the face of his teacher. One, two, three minutes passed, and the boy scratched one yellow leg with the big toe of the other foot reflectively, and thought, and thought, and thought.

The superintendent was gazing at Tony with lofty disapproval; the stranger was watching with half-closed eyes the flushed, anxious face of the girl who was concentrating all her powers of suggestion on the child.

"Why, *you* know, Tony!"—this from the teacher—"Don't you remember what I kept you in on last Friday?" But Tony didn't remember. "Think hard, dear," she urged in her eager sympathy; then, by way of desperate suggestion: "What do cows have——?"

A flood of light broke over the dull, beclouded face.

"Calves!" exclaimed Tony, certain of himself for the first time in his groping existence.

"Cape Horn!" screamed the end-man above the uproar which followed. Tony went foot, but with a sullen, savage protest about not having "missed."

The superintendent swelled with shocked and portentous disapproval, but the stranger turned his back on the group and pinned his attention to the pine thicket in the near perspective. Mary Elizabeth saw his broad shoulders shake unmistakably, and hated men on the spot, but she rallied her outward composure heroically. The children were sent back to their seats, and quiet was restored.

The hour for closing had come, and the teacher, flushed and nervous, asked the superintendent if

there was anything else he had to say before the pupils were dismissed. There was nothing in his dull, heavy eyes to suggest that he ever would really have anything else to say, but the look was deceptive. The fat director of public education rose ponderously to his feet again, and for fully twenty minutes harangued his gaping, awe-inspired hearers about their rights as American citizens and their responsibilities as the fathers and mothers of countless unborn generations. It certainly did sound scary the way he put it; and he took a piece of chalk and showed them by the simple combination of a figure "1" and a whole charmstring of ciphers how billions of people yet to come were going to be ruined by the fact that "that one boy" (poor Tony again) "wouldn't steddly what his teacher was tryin' to learn him."

At this juncture, one pitiful "I nurver now, neither!" wailed through the room, and then Tony subsided into his coat-sleeve, crushed by the weight of ruined generations. The next instant his teacher was beside him on the bench, and her arm was over his heaving shoulders.

"Of course you didn't, dear," she whispered into his shock of colorless hair. Then she raised her head and shot a look at the superintendent of public education that dared him and his unborn millions to "Come on!" The look glanced off the superintendent's ossified intelligence, but the man beyond caught the splendid fire of it and kindled in answer to it.

But the superintendent had the last shot, and he proceeded to hold out to his hearers the ultimate hope that their young teacher would learn how to learn them better when she found out what the Lord created the hickory for. And he added the severe admonition:

"An' I don't want to hear o' no pamperin' o' children in this here *great* county of ours. What our fathers an' mothers was strong enough to stand, *we* air strong enough to stand. Yes, boys an' girls, hit takes hardships to make *real men*, men what kin hold high orfice. Why, jes look at *me*, I ain't never had no pamperin'!"

At this juncture the stranger slipped quietly out, and the official mogul took a weighty and solemn farewell of them, commending them, with certain reservations, to the care of Providence.

A few minutes after the creaking of his buggy wheels had died away in the distance, every child was well on his homeward way, for the teacher dismissed all of them, good, bad, and indifferent, at the same time this afternoon. As the sound of the last childish voice died away, Mary Elizabeth sank down on the steps and dropped her head on her arms.

"Say the word, and I'll go after him." The stranger laid his hand gently on her arm as he spoke. At the unexpected sound of his voice she looked up quickly. Indignation and despair over what the day had brought had marred the lines of her beautiful face and had deepened to black the sometime

violet of her eyes. He sat down on the step beside her. "Child, you mustn't take things to heart this way. Now what is there for you to worry so about?"

"That—that—old fat ignoramus can hardly read and write——"

"Well, I wouldn't bother about that."

"Yes, but he's superintendent of education for this county, I tell you!"

"What do you care?"

The girl looked at him wonderingly.

"Why, don't *you* care?"

"No."

"You don't care when you see these poor, ignorant things go on the same way year after year, the blind led by the blind?"

"I don't believe in the education of the masses."

The girl stared unbelievably for a moment. and then, all unconsciously to herself, moved farther away from him. "But—but," she almost gasped, "you care when you see the people's money literally thrown away, don't you?"

"Well, frankly, I'm not interested in politics."

Mary Elizabeth's plans and specifications of a man had been of her own making, uninfluenced by any concrete example except the lofty one furnished by her benefactor. The man of her designing had been big, taking his citizenship from the world, and making the big world-interests his own. He had accepted the franchise as a solemn obligation.

But here was something new under her sun. She was simply unable to account for it. Yet this new

thing was a very positive quantity, and its strong, virile personality was imminent and absorbing.

"Say, look here, I've got a scheme on hand. Come, let me show you," he exclaimed, and he lifted her up by the arm, almost bodily, and led her back into the deserted school-house.

"Now let me tell you. It is a shame for these poor little devils to have to suffer in a shack like this, and I'm going to have it fixed up for them. I've got a couple of carpenters at work at my place, and there's plenty of lumber over at the mill."

"You mean you are going to do it *yourself*?"

"Sure! Now if you can get your trustees to let us, we'll make the place comfortable. Are the old codgers apt to kick?"

"Why, no, of course not. But, they are not fond of you—did you know it?"

"I have very good reason to suspect it.—I'll tell you! Let them believe it's your guardian that's doing it."

"But that would be deception, wouldn't it?"

The man turned from scanning the crude walls and looked at her with a curious expression that she could not interpret. The corners of his mouth twitched.

"Oh, *would* it?" he said.

"Yes, I'm sure it would. I'll just tell Uncle Beck the truth and he'll manage it for us."

"Good enough. I don't apprehend any opposition, though. I have somehow got the notion that your hillite will take anything that comes his way.

Now let's see what is to be done." He took out a note-book and pencil.

"The cracks in the floor and in the walls should be stopped," she ventured.

"Oh, we'll ceil and re-floor the whole business."

"But won't that cost a great deal?"

"Why, no. Then we must stop up that queer hole and put in a couple of windows with ashes. You want one on each side, don't you?"

Mary Elizabeth fairly gasped at the bigness of his plans. "No, no," she corrected, "if there are to be windows, they must be in that wall so the light will come over the children's shoulders."

"And, incidentally, be right in the teacher's eyes. No, the windows are going to be put here and there."

"Oh, but the children's——!"

"I'm the one that's doing this. One good strong door with glass in the upper half for more light," he was making notes as he talked, "and a new roof, new door-steps—and, see here, we'll stop up the fireplace and put in a base-burner with a jacket around it." Something in the girl's face made him hurry on: "But the carpenters will need space to work in. Do you think you can get your honorable trustees to give a week's holiday while the work is being done?"

"Uncle Beck would be willing, I'm sure, but I wouldn't do it for the world. The children would lose so much valuable time," she replied. "There's a vacant cabin down the road a piece that we could use while this was being fixed."

The stranger said something under his breath, and Mary Elizabeth looked at him with a question in her eyes, but he didn't repeat his exclamation.

"I'm so glad you do care, after all," she said gently.

"Care'? For what?"

"For these poor people here."

"Oh!—One never knows what one is going to care for."

A whinny from the outside seemed to remind him of something.

"Come out here, I've something to show you," he said.

In a few minutes they had the school-house closed, and were making their way through the scrub thicket to where he had left his horse. But the bay was not alone. Tethered to a sapling near him was a clean-limbed, restless little mare that was turning and twisting her graceful neck in impatient protest against the thing that restrained her. A lady's saddle was strapped upon her back, and all of her trappings were of the finest.

"Another!" she exclaimed, "why, you were complaining only the other day of having to play stable-boy to one."

"Yes, but thanks to you, I have performed the impossible—have actually got one of these natives to look after them for me."

"How 'thanks to me'?"

"One of your adoring pupils—I told him you wanted him to."

"You *did*? Which one?"

"That young naturalist that you turned down a while ago because he answered your question." He turned away and went up to the filly.

"This is 'Donnie,'" he said, by way of introduction, and he stroked the pretty creature's nose in answer to her low, affectionate whinny. "I want you two to know each other," he continued, as Mary Elizabeth joined him in caressing the new-comer. "Here, give her this," and he felt in his pocket and laid several lumps of sugar in her hand. "You and Donnie ought to get along nicely," he continued, "you are both so—so——"

"So what, now?" she challenged, across Donnie's nose.

"Shall I say it?" he laughed back at her; "well, then, so live and sensitive, and—contrary."

The girl only smiled reservedly, and he added: "The poor creature has been shut up in a city stable, and I had her brought out for her health."

"And was the saddle not thriving either?" Mary Elizabeth was looking at him across Donnie's nose again.

"I thought you might be good enough to help me exercise her," he ventured, treading gingerly on the uncertain ground.

"You should have asked me first."

"But you would have——"

"Declined to let you do it, of course."

"But it's done now. I really had to bring her, and I just had the saddle shipped on a venture. You wouldn't be——"

"'Sensitive'?—'Contrary'?" she suggested.

"No. Much obliged for your help, but 'mean' is the word I'm after. You won't be mean, now, will you?—After we have agreed to be friends?" The girl did not answer him, but stood stroking the filly, thoughtfully, while her mouth took on a proud reserve.

Suddenly the man reverted to his old tactics with her:

"Come, get up," he said peremptorily, and he held a hand for her foot.

A little later they were threading the cool brown woods together on a ride that proved to be but the first of a long series.

CHAPTER VI

THE diaphanous layers of gray mist had not yet lifted from "Bullus" Valley when Babe Davis, mounted on his flea-bit mule, burst through the dewy thicket that fringed the haunted premises of White-faced Silas, and stopped in stupid wonder at the scene. The underbrush had been cut away, and the weed stubble levelled to the ground—a most unheard-of condition. On the roof of the cabin were great yellow patches of new shingles, and all about the place were glints of fresh pine boards added to strengthen or to protect—possibly to challenge. The steps were new, the door hung straight, and whole panes of glass filled the window-frame. And there, sure enough, were the much-talked-of curtains, symbol of mystery, interposed between him and what lay within.

The sight was enough to make any man clutch the shining rifle that lay across his saddle and set firm his sagging jaw. For fully five minutes, the hillite sat with his neck thrust forward drinking in the offending details of the scene. Then he gave vent to one dry, peremptory "Hulloa!"

Stoney Lonesome answered the challenge, but no human voice replied.

"Hulloa, thar, I say! Hulloa!"

"Well, what is it?" John Marshall opened the

cabin door and stood, coatless and dishevelled, on the top step. "What can I do for you?"

"I come to see ef I wouldn't better do somethin' for you, stranger." The man rode slowly forward, his hands still on his rifle. "Thought mebbe as how you'd better be put on notice afore you went too fur."

If the stranger caught the full suggestion of the nervous finger-play on the long rifle-barrel or of the surface shine of the ugly, prominent eyes, he made no sign. He was in shirt-sleeves and clearly unarmed, but he folded his arms and answered, tartly: "On notice about what?"

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth."

A quick intake of breath was the only sign that escaped the man—then he and the hillite fixed each the other with one long, steady look.

"What about Mary Elizabeth?" Marshall asked coldly. "Let's understand each other."

"That's what I come for, stranger. I thought as how, knowin' Ma'y 'Lizbeth didn't have no father nor no brothers nor nothin', you might be thinkin' she didn't have nobody to take her part, so I 'lowed I'd drap 'round an' put you straight. I'm here, stranger, an' I'm a-goin' to keep on bein' here—see the p'int?"

The eyes of the other man suddenly deepened to intensity, but his voice was steady and even as he replied:

"Yes, I see the point. But what I don't see is why you think it necessary to tell me this."

"You been mighty free with your comp'ny an' your money lately, mister, an' M'ay 'Lizbeth air mighty unsuspectin'-like. You see hit's this a-way—Ma'y 'Lizbeth b'longs here. True, she's got a lot o' book-larnin', but she ain't to blame for that; an' she's a good gal an' a mighty innercent one in spite of it. So, you see that, me bein' from the same folks, hit's up to me to see that no harm don't come to her—an', stranger, I'm goin' to do it!"

The man on the door-step gave him a look which he had not the imagination to interpret, then reached back and pulled shut the door behind him as if openly cutting off retreat. There was no mistaking his meaning, however, when he folded his arms again and said, emphatically:

"Bully for you!" Then he added in the tone of a man speaking to a man who had the right to question—"On my honor, I am playing fair with the girl, and she doesn't need your protection from me."

He hesitated a moment as if making up his mind how to proceed, and then said: "But she does need you—she needs us both. Your people here don't trust her. You probably know that better than I do. They don't like her, somehow, and they seem to be growing more and more prejudiced against her. They are unkind to her already, and they may come to be worse. I say this to you frankly because you have this morning proved your friendship for the girl. I *have* been free with my money and my company. I have been trying to give the child a few comforts and a little pleasure because I saw

how she needed them. Of course I have sought her society because I enjoyed it; but I have deliberately done it also because I felt that I could, in a measure, take her mind off the unpleasant experiences she so often encounters here. I felt that she needed me—" he took the full measure of the other man with his eyes, and then added—"And if I know anything about the meanness of this old world, she'll need you and me, too, before we are many months older. Here's my hand on it that we'll take care of the girl."

He was weighed in the balance yet a moment longer, and then his firm white hand was met by the strong, horny grasp of the rustic, and the two looked at each other though across the seeming breadth of a civilization—man and man—equals!

After a moment of awkward silence, the hillite asked, quietly: "You fixed up the school-house——?"

"For Mary Elizabeth."

"She thought you done it for the children—Ma'y 'Lizabeth is that proud!"

"I don't give a damn for the children."

"An' you fetched that thar filly——?"

"For Mary Elizabeth. It is unsafe for her to walk these country roads alone. I have sent the mare to her night and morning for her trip to and from school; but the boy, Tony Thaggin, whom I hired to go errands, says that your mother gave her blue blazes about it when he got there with the horse yesterday morning. One of the things you can do for the girl is to make your mother hold her tongue."

"Stranger, did you ever try anything like that?"

"Well, if I did, by George, I'd succeed!"

"You ain't never tried hit! An' while we're on the subject, stranger, hit's been proned into me that you'd better send your readin' books what you want Ma'y 'Lizbeth to read for you to the school-house. Ma tuck them last ones away from Tony an' burnt 'em up. You see," he continued, lamely, for an explanation was plainly due the stranger, "we-uns were fetched up on the Bible an' the almanac, an' we ain't never thought hit right to be readin' 'bout things what ain't the truth. Of course, Ma'y 'Lizbeth bein' brung up diff'rent, she don't know no better."

"Of course not," assented the listener. "And since we are speaking frankly to each other, I want you to know that your mother ought to be made to see that Mary Elizabeth is not very strong, and that, being brought up differently, she can't stand the heavy tasks your mother gives her. She told me herself that Mrs. Davis wouldn't let her have any water unless she drew it herself, and that the well-bucket was so heavy it hurt her to pull it up."

"I'll draw hit for her," said the rustic softly. Then, in a tone that partook at once of savagery and resignation: "I know that ma's done got sanctification, but she's the meanest white woman I ever seen when she gits started on a body. She's mad with Ma'y 'Lizbeth b'cause she don't do nothin' but set around an' hear lessons outen a book. Of course Ma'y 'Lizbeth don't do no work, but she ain't to

blame for it. She were brung up diff'rent, an' she don't know no better."

"Of course not," assented the stranger again, "but you understand, and you won't let your mother impose on her." Suddenly he laid his hand on the mule's neck with the force of a slap: "Davis, what is the foundation of this sneaking enmity against the girl?"

After a moment of hesitation, the hillite said in a tone which testified to the awfulness of the crime:

"For one thing, her pa *informed!*"

"'Informed'?—Oh, informed the revenue officers, you mean?"

The other nodded.

"What became of him?"

"Hit ain't for me to say, stranger."

"How did she come to get the school here?"

"Beck Logan, him that's postmaster an' keeps the store, 'ranged hit all with the man that tuck Ma'y 'Lizbeth 'way from here an' fetched her up. Uncle Beck had tuck her to his house after hit all happened, an' kep' her thar tell the stranger come along an' tuck a fancy to her. Then when the stranger got tired of her an' wanted to send her back, Beck up an' said she should come an' welcome. An' he mounted his mule an' carried the word to all the neighbors that Ma'y 'Lizbeth weren't to blame for them that went before her, an' they jes nachully had to give her a square deal. Hit would a-made your mouth water to hear him read the riot act to ma.—An' the funny part of it was, he mars-

tered her an' made her take Ma'y 'Lizbeth to boa'd an' promise to keep her own mouth shet."

"It would have been better for her to board with the storekeeper, it seems to me."

"Wa-al, you see, hit's this a-way, Uncle Beck is a widder man, an' hit wouldn't a-been manners."

"Oh, I see. Well, is she making any headway with the people, do you know? She doesn't seem to think so."

"A little, stranger; Mis' Thaggin is plumb carried away with her; but Shan an' his ma is dead set agin her. She's been ra-al good buyin' medicine for Gran'ma Thaggin, but gran'ma is awful sot in her likes an' onlikes, an' *she* says she ain't to be bought over that easy. Besides, Ma'y 'Lizbeth told her that a man 'way off somewhars had already done paid for all she was able to do for people up here, an' gran'ma has tuck a notion that Ma'y 'Lizbeth ain't even givin' her rightful share."

"The infernal old hag!—Look here, Davis, it's just the girl's over-sensitive conscience that's making her do that way. She is evidently trying to pay back to her own people what that guardian of hers has done for her. He raised her with the one idea of doing all she could for them, but he is not providing her with a cent to spend on them. I got that much out of her, myself. If Mary Elizabeth is buying medicine for the old woman, she is paying for it out of the money she makes herself."

"Now do tell!"

"How about the others?"

"They are mostly agin her on account of what's back of her, stranger, but of course hit don't put no change on me. Then, they got all tore up about her perscriptions on the wall of the school-house, an' they don't like some o' the things she teaches. But worse'n that, stranger, Ma'y 'Lizbeth's done got her back up 'bout the county sup'rintender's not knowin' enough to suit her, an' she's been talkin' 'bout him scan'lous. I heerd her with my own years, tellin' a crowd o' men at all-day singin' last Sunday that Mr. Sykes *couldn't* sup'rintend when he didn't know nothin' 'bout books—an' *that* in the face o' the fact that he's already been doin' it for seventeen year!—Lord, hit's powerful hard to do anything with Ma'y 'Lizbeth, or anything for her!"

The other man was silent for a few minutes. Once or twice he looked as if he were about to say something, and then he seemed to abandon the intention. When he at length found voice, it was to say, simply:

"But her manners are so sweet and so sincere—that ought to win them."

"I don't know," the other replied, hopelessly. "Some of 'em don't like her manners, neither. Thar's Trav Williams jes natchully hates her for the way she done him."

"Why, what did she do to him?"

"He says she p'intedly turned her back on him at the store one day an' tuck sides with that man you had here."

"That's a lie, of course!"

"I don't know, stranger, Ri Slaton seen it, an'

what little he tells is apt to be true. Hit's mighty like Ma'y 'Lizbeth to act uppish when she don't like you, an' she's powerful fitful. Of course she ain't to blame for it, though—she don't know no better."

He was looking across and above the misty valley to the sunlight on the hills beyond, and there was an infinite hunger in his great, stupid eyes. After a little he spoke again.

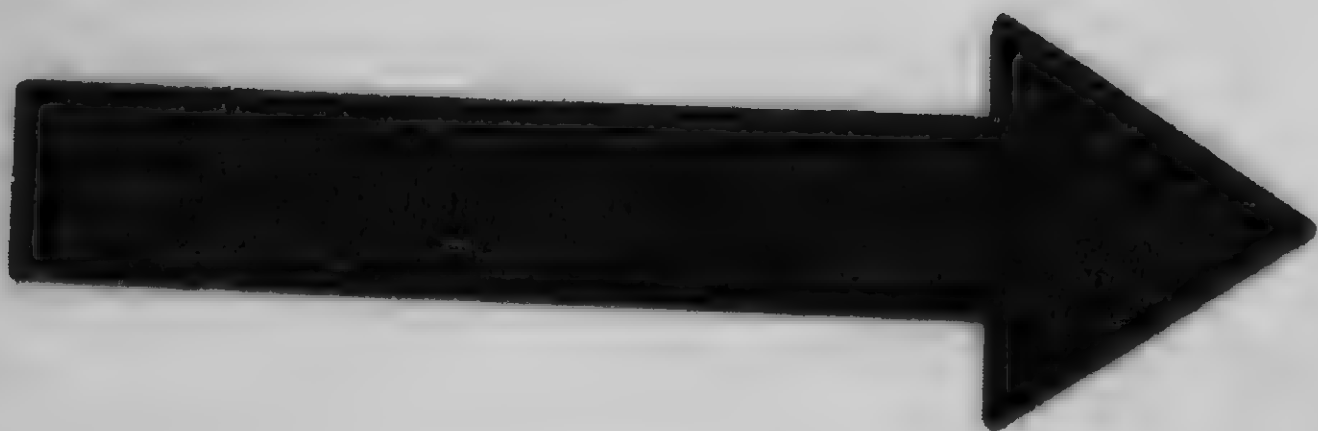
"Stranger," he said, hoarsely, and the fingers on the rifle-barrel grew nervous again, "you air the kind o' folks she's been fetched up with, but you ain't the same people, though. You ain't the same blood, an' you ain't from the same soil. I don't know what you want a-foolin' round Ma'y 'Lizbeth——"

"I'm afraid you don't understand me in spite of my painstaking explanation."

"You love Ma'y 'Lizbeth?"

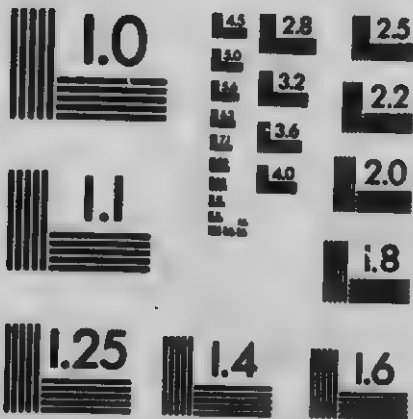
"Why, no!"

The hillite surveyed him for fully a minute with bewilderment written all over his features. "How kin you he'p it?" he questioned.



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CHAPTER VII

It was early Saturday morning, but Babe was already back from the store, for the unexpected had happened. A letter had come to Mary Elizabeth and he had ridden at high speed to deliver it into her hand.

If he had cherished the anticipation of standing around and watching her eager face as she read it, he soon found how vain are human hopes, for Mary Elizabeth seized the letter with quick thanks, ran into her own little room, and shut the door firmly before she even looked at the "backing" of it.

Inside, with her back to the door, Mary Elizabeth examined the address. Thank heaven! it was not another long dissertation from Mr. Fenwick preaching duty to rebel youthfulness. No, it was a real letter, it was from "one of the girls."

Long and hungrily did she linger over the few scantily written pages which contained more of an apology for not having written than any definite news of the old school-girl life they both had left, or of the brilliant, alluring career the young society girl had entered upon. The letter ended with the vague statement that there was an enclosure which would doubtless prove of interest to the reader.

The enclosure now commended itself to Mary Elizabeth's attention. She had laid it aside unnoticed in her first eager haste for a breath of life from

the outside world, but she now took it up and unfolded it with growing interest. It was written in a man's bold hand and on business stationery. It ran:

DEAR FRED,

This is the third letter I have written to try to lure you to the hills, but you'll come now, I'm thinking.

I have found your violet-eyed, dark-haired, pale-faced woman, and she is just what you have always held she would be—ravishingly beautiful. Do come up. If you could paint her face and what lies beneath it, your fame would be assured. But she isn't your Madonna, my boy, for she's got the devil's own spirit lurking in the depths of her. Her people were feudists—so is she, I suspect; and I have half a fancy that she is the one I'm going to have trouble with. But never mind that. What I want to convince you of is that she is the model you have been looking for.

Do you remember trying to make me understand—you fool poet-painter—what a woman's spirit would blossom into if the world influences were not allowed to enter in and render it complex? You said she would be primal, but primally pure. Well, I am beginning to understand, I think. If you'll believe me, this hill-girl—she claims to be native here, but, by the eternal fitness of her clothes, she doesn't look it!—is the woman I told you would never exist. She has been well educated—but convent fashion—and has an innocence of the world that would make a long-clothes baby look like a roué. You won't believe me when I tell you that I am being good, but the fellow that would put a girl like that wise, would pull up young cotton. It would be funny if it wasn't just a little pitiful to see how absolutely ignorant she is of men and of how to deal with them. She has never reached that most ladylike and perfectly proper stage of being afraid of the big masculine bugaboo, but harbors the gentle trustfulness of a wild thing that has never been frightened.

She is all your fancy painted her. You'd say she is a white hyacinth or some such rot; but she is just a slim girl beauty with a woman in her eyes. The man who stirs her to her depths is going to be gloriously happy, or gloriously the other thing.

I'll meet you at Lawler, the nearest railroad station!

Besides, I need you, you selfish prig. I need some damned idealist like you to keep me from wringing these natives' necks. They are giving my surveyors no end of trouble and I'm afraid will scare them entirely off the job. Only one of the bunch has good titles, and I've got that one on the string. I am taking up all the tracts which I didn't already own by having military bounty land-warrants located on them—all, that is, except one quarter-section block that could not be covered by the warrants. I have regularly entered that, and will make final proof now very shortly.

The natives are only squatting on the land, you see, their forbears having conquered it from the Indians, and having merely held it since by the right of the strongest without getting out government patents to it. I am expecting advices from Washington soon as to the locating of the last warrants, and the time will shortly be ripe for warning the hill-Billies to move on and make way for progress.

I can't have the work commenced until the titles are all secure, but that will be in a few weeks now, I hope. If you should happen to recover from your squeamishness, I'll take you in on the ground-floor yet and make you rich. In a few years from now you will fish in a lake that fills a mountain valley five miles long and furnishes twenty thousand horsepower for a thriving little manufacturing city on the plains below. Isn't this worth hobnobbing with a white-faced "ha'nt" in a log——

The sheet which should have followed had not been enclosed, and Mary Elizabeth was left staring at the one she held, in bewilderment.

Not until she got to the mention of the "white-faced ha'nt" did she once guess the author. The stranger, John Marshall, was the man who had written it! But to whom? About what? A note on the reverse page in the hand of her girl correspondent, unnoticed until now, said: "Fred Dearing, an awfully talented young portrait-painter here, showed me this. I was telling him what a pretty model I thought you would make when he drew this letter from his pocket and said that it was a funny coincidence that two of his friends had found for him the model he had been looking for, and at about the same time. A few questions brought out the fact—or at least it looks to me like a fact—that you are the girl here described. I begged Fred for the part of the letter that touched on you, to send you. Do let me know if you are the girl, and who on earth the man is you have captured! Fred says he has no end of money."

Mary Elizabeth turned back quickly to read with a fuller understanding. "She is just what you have always held she would be—ravishingly beautiful," the stranger had written about her. She looked up quickly into the little mirror which Babe had bought for her, but glanced as quickly away from its imperfect, slandering surface. "Ravishingly beautiful"—but what did he mean by the other? What did *he* know of "what lay beneath"—he, John Marshall, the stranger? A flash of the spirit that he had divined, repudiated his recognition of it, but the next minute the girl smiled, for had he not called her "beautiful"?

The fleeting smile gave way to a rising flush as she followed the lines further. What in the world could the man be talking about now? She had reached the "long-clothes baby" clause, and her eyes were flashing but shamed. So it was "funny" and "pitiful" how ignorant she was of men and how to deal with them, was it?—her cheeks were scorching now. And what, *what* was it she had not had sense enough to be afraid of?—for he meant, of course, that she didn't have any sense of propriety. She had done something that wasn't proper and he was laughing at and pitying her! She could not and would not stand it!

"I need some damned idealist like you to keep me from wringing these natives' necks"—Mary Elizabeth was waking up now. These lines had meant nothing to her at first, but now she suddenly felt that they were weighted with a sinister meaning. "My surveyors"! The expression struck her, and she read on avidly: "Only one of the bunch has a good title, and I've got that one on the string. I am taking up all the tracts which I didn't already own by having military bounty land-warrants located on them—all, that is, except one quarter-section block that could not be covered by the warrants. I have regularly entered that, and will make final proof now very shortly." The girl suppressed a cry as she read on: "They are only squatting on the land, you see, their forbears having conquered it from the Indians, and having merely held it since by the right of the strongest without getting

out government patents to it. I am expecting advices from Washington soon as to the locating of the last warrants, and the time will shortly be ripe for warning the hill-Billies to move on and make way for progress." Mary Elizabeth crushed the paper between her desperate fingers, and looked up quickly with a smothered, "Help me!"

A grave-eyed memory answered her cry.

For the first time, the girl had turned to him, and somehow, she suddenly felt him very near. He would help. He would understand. In one of their last talks together he had told her about a man who had entered government land which the simple natives thought they owned, and what a fight he had had to save it for the poor settlers. It had bored her then, but it had impressed her, and now she found herself striving to remember all the details as he had related them.

She would write him at once, the girl determined, and enclose him that letter.

But the letter was John Marshall's! The thought came like an illumining flash, and the girl grew fixed and still in the light of what it uncovered. The letter was John Marshall's, and there was only one thing to be done—take it to him and tell him that she had read it and knew him for what he was!—But maybe—maybe—and with the hope, something that had been struck cold in her suddenly flamed up again—yes, maybe he could explain. Why, of course he could explain! The girl seized her hat and jacket, flung open the door which seemed to

obtrude itself between her and what she desperately hoped, and ran out into the morning freshness. There was no one near to question her, and she was soon out of sight, making her breathless way to the haunted house.

It was ten o'clock and after when she arrived, exhausted and white, at the renovated door-step of the erstwhile ghostly place and knocked for admittance. She did not realize that she was leaning against the door for support, after her hurried and trying journey, till it suddenly gave way under an opening hand and let her almost fall into the arms of the man she was seeking.

"Why, child, what on earth—" was his greeting, and the very tones of his voice made the girl ashamed that she had ever doubted him.

"Sit down," he exclaimed, and she was soon seated in a big split-bottomed rocking-chair with her astonished host standing over her, deeply concerned.

"I'll tell you in a minute," she panted.

Marshall turned away, busying himself at a shiny new tin safe for a minute, but soon returned to her side with a glass of wine which he held to her lips.

"Drink this," he said, "and then come out into the fresh air and let's take a walk."

Mary Elizabeth drank as she was bidden, but again rested her head on the chair-back and looked about her. Everywhere were signs that money had been freely spent in providing whatever of comforts the region afforded, but beyond this the interior was

much like the rooms she saw every day. It was a good, *homey* place to rest in when one was tired in body and in spirit, and when one needed strength to straighten out a disagreeable complication of circumstances.

Marshall was still standing over her. He had forgotten to put back the wine-glass. After a moment he asked:

"Don't you feel like taking a walk now?"

"Oh, I can't go any further," she said wearily.

"Let me tell you all about it here while I rest, and then I can go back."

He had taken an uneasy seat in front of her on the edge of a table that stood against the wall, and now regarded her with an inexplicable expression in his deep eyes as he stroked his jaw perplexedly.

"You are not really as tired as you think," was the audible conclusion he arrived at, "and we needn't walk fast, you know. Come on and let's try it."

"You are not often inconsiderate," exclaimed the quick-tempered girl; "I tell you I am tired to death, and I am not going till I rest!"

John Marshall looked at her a minute like a man who wanted to speak, then turned and went out on the front steps, where he stood for some little time gazing fixedly down the mountain road. After a while he came back with a determined expression on his face, and walked quietly up to her.

"You must come," he said. "You don't understand. I am looking for Shan Thaggin and his wife about the matter of a land sale, and they must not

find you here. They must not for your sake, child; people gossip even in the backwoods."

Mary Elizabeth was on her feet in an instant with the "long-clothes baby" clause of his letter suddenly burnt into her understanding.

"I never thought—I never thought for an instant—" she protested, tears of shame filling the violet depths of her eyes.

Three minutes afterward they were threading the wood-way together, he a little in front talking cheerily about the pretty weather, and she behind, silent, with head down, like a child that had been punished. A plunge or two through the pine thicket, and they were out of sight of the haunted house and of the mountain road that led to it. Here a big log was soon singled out by the man and he turned reassuringly to the silent girl behind him.

"See," he said, "here is a good place to rest, and you can tell me all about it." When they were seated side by side on the huge log, he said, in the indulgent big-brother tone he had assumed toward her of late:

"What's the trouble, little girl?"

"I got a letter this morning," began the girl with her characteristic directness, "and it enclosed a letter from you to somebody. I have brought it to you because it is yours, and because I want you to tell me that *it isn't true*." And she handed him his letter.

Nothing perturbed, Marshall unfolded the sheet and began to read. Mary Elizabeth could easily

follow, for he had taken his seat close beside her. His quick eye scanned the first few lines—"she is just what you have always held she would be—ravishingly beautiful," she saw him read.

"But it is true!" he exclaimed, turning on her suddenly a look that made her draw away. "Oh, come back; I am not to blame for it, God made you," and he took her by the arm to detain her as he returned to the letter. He looked at her once again with a challenging, laughing, daring glance such as he seldom gave her now. This time he was looking to see just how much she understood of his more intimate analysis of her, but the woman in her had retired behind an all-obscuring veil, and her index-finger pointed farther down the page:

"That," she said quietly, "what do you mean by that?"

The man's face changed as he read. It darkened. It took on a grim, set look.

"What do you *mean* by it?" came in startled exclamation from the girl who was watching every shadow of change in his face.

The man quietly tore the missive into a hundred little bits. "Just what it says," he answered slowly, as he sprinkled the white fragments on the pine straw under their feet.

"No!" There was the break of a heart in the cry that escaped her, but the next moment she was on her feet and the violet of her eyes had turned to black.

"Yes," the man answered her. Then he caught

her suddenly by the wrists. "Listen to me," he insisted, as she struggled to free herself from him. His tightening grasp brought her face to face with him and she looked him in the eyes.

"You are a *scoun-drel*!" she said.

Marshall drew back as if she had struck him. He released her hands and rose to his feet. Mary Elizabeth could never have imagined that look of him—the blue-white of his set features and the blaze on his terrible eyes.

"You," he said slowly, "are—a woman."

"Yes, but you will have men that you can fight. And real men, too," she flashed back. "Don't imagine because these poor things are grotesquely ignorant that you'll have any easy time in robbing them! The day is coming when you will find out that it is as hard to take a log cabin from a real man as it is to rob him of a landed estate."

He was standing his full six feet with his head up and his straight look challenging her own, but he made no move to interrupt her torrent of indignation.

"Besides," the girl rushed on, "I am here to see that you don't drive them out of their homes. You think I don't know anything about law, but I do. I know that there is a way to thwart rascality like this! I know where I can get the best lawyer in this State and he can stop you, I can tell you, for he has dealt with just such cases before. And I am going to tell every man in this valley what you are up to, and we will combine against you——"

"You are going to tell these people what you have found out?" The measured coldness of his voice contrasted queerly with her high-pitched, excited tones.

"Just as soon as I can get the word to them."

"And are you going to tell them *how* you found it out?"

Something in his voice struck the girl quiet a moment.

"You—you—oh, what do you mean?" she demanded, half in fright.

"That you got your information through reading a private letter that was not intended for your eyes?"

The girl steadied herself by the log that they had quitted.

"Why—why—I—you—I *will* tell them!" The stranger answered her never a word, but he was looking straight into her eyes. "I—I must tell them," she wavered—and then, pleadingly, "You will *let* me tell them?"

"No."

Just at that moment the voices of the Thaggins, man and wife, come on the matter of a land deal, were heard beyond the pine thicket.

When Mary Elizabeth made her dazed way home that morning, it was with the realization that her lonely path was being guarded by Tony Thaggin in the obscure distance. By whose orders he was watching over her, she knew only too well, and somehow the knowledge made the broken heart within her throb with a yet keener anguish.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next afternoon brought Mary Elizabeth another letter, and in a most unexpected way. Uncle Beck had met Babe at church and had handed him a letter that should have been delivered the day before, but which had been overlooked.

Mary Elizabeth had done the unheard-of and unforgivable thing of refusing to go to church that morning, and had stayed at home and devoted three solid hours of the Sabbath to writing her benefactor for help and tearing up her mystifying missives as soon as they were penned. And it was no easy task, for she felt in honor bound not to disclose to him what she had learned from Marshall's letter. At length, however, she had succeeded in writing a letter which she was willing to send. It said simply:

DEAR GUARDIAN:

I want you to help me do something for somebody who needs it very much. It may cost a great deal—as much as a hundred dollars, maybe. I am not at liberty to tell you now just what it is, but the cause is deserving, and I know you can trust me to tell you the truth. Won't you write me the full details of that incident about the man's "entering" another man's land? Tell me all about it, and how you saved the land for the real owner. Write me this at once, please.

There is something down in the bottom of my heart that I would like to say to you this morning, but I don't know how

to do it. I want to be really sure that it is there first. Please, sir, don't forget about the hundred dollars, and write me at once about the land matter.

Affectionately,

MARY ELIZABETH.

At last the letter was sealed and stamped and on the little pine shelf under the looking-glass. Mary Elizabeth looked at it with the feeling that she had done all that was in her power so far. There really was nothing else to be done unless she were to pray that it bring the needed help. But the relations between Mary Elizabeth and the Hearer of Prayer had been strained for some time, and last night she had taken Him to task for many things and had told Him just what she thought of Him. Clearly she couldn't expect anything of *Him*. But her guardian would help her. And she set her white teeth to stop the quiver of her chin, and went out to join the family group, just returned from church.

Babe's unobtrusive brow had never been accused of harboring anything of wisdom, but down in the rugged breast of the man there was something which stood as its equivalent. He did not give Mary Elizabeth this second letter until he was able to do so entirely unobserved. This was not till after dinner was over and the girl had set out for the woods in an effort to escape what she had battled with in that little room throughout all her waking hours since John Marshall had set his cowardly seal of silence upon her lips.

"No—go back," she said to Babe Davis in the

tone one might have used to a faithful dog that was following. "I want to be by myself." They were down by the big gully, where he had followed to give her the letter. With the wistful acquiescence of the ever-faithful, the man obeyed, but he startled her with the question:

"You ain't a-goin' to walk with *him*, air you?"

"No!" vehemently.

"Well, don't," he said; "leastways, not fur." Then he turned back, leaving her speechless with astonishment that he, the erstwhile dumbly acquiescent, had spoken to protest.

But Babe and his advice were left behind with the sight of the little cabin, and Mary Elizabeth plunged deeper and deeper into the woods, and at last found for herself a shady seat on the pine-needles far from every sight and sound except those of the living forest.

She had already looked at the envelope. It was directed in a man's hand—but not *his*, and was post-marked "Mobile." A moment after she was seated she had its one page unfolded before her. The communication ran:

MISS MARY E. DALE,
Pinetop, Ala.

DEAR MADAM:

It becomes my painful duty to inform you that your guardian—or rather, the gentleman who acted as guardian to you for a number of years—dropped dead in his office on the afternoon of the sixteenth, of heart failure.

You would have been informed of the sad news sooner, if I had known your whereabouts. The deceased, as you prob-

ably know, was very unmethodical, and having no premonition of death, took no steps to provide for the easy administration of his affairs. It has been found, however, that his debts are fully equal to his assets. He left no will, and had no heirs. Permit me to say that I regret very much your guardian did not leave you substantially provided for, and that I will be glad to serve you in any way if you should care to look further into his affairs.

Yours very truly,

R. T. BOSTICK.

Bostick & Weaver, Att'ys.

Mary Elizabeth looked up from the formal signature in a dazed, helpless way. No, the sun had not gone out, it was something else that had made the world turn dark—something which had no connection with herself, which had no part in her desperate schemes against the stranger, and no kinship whatever with the graying skies above, the wind-swept, brown-carpeted earth beneath, or aught of hill-tragedy that lay between—something which erased all else and wrote across the face of everything: "Whose arm raised that gray head from the dusty office floor?"

The girl did not cry out, neither did she cast herself down in despair upon the brown earth. It was all so strange, so unreal, it simply *could not* be. She sat very still there among the pine-needles and looked into nothingness, utterly incapable of accepting the thing which had descended upon her. Again she was striving, as on that memorable night, to recall his features, and again only the quiet look of him answered her summons to appear.

The gray hours crept by, the sky darkened, and the restless pines grew still; and in the evening quiet, came face to face the untamed spirit of the girl and the memory of the man who had done his stumbling best for her—with the Hearer of Prayer to judge between. But it was all so complex, so unreal, not Mary Elizabeth could understand, nor could, perhaps, the grave-eyed memory—only *He* could know who was God at once of the fettered, struggling souls of the living and the disembodied spirits of the dead.

But when Babe Davis came searching in the twilight for her, the girl looked up at him with troubled, mist-dimmed eyes and said:

"Babe, I have lost a *friend*."

Somewhere in that unmeasured stretch of pain that links the death of a hopeless day to the dawn of one that is still more hopeless, Mary Elizabeth reached what she thought was the answer to her life problem: She would pay back the debt she owed him—not to the last dollar, but to the last heart throb of it—by a life of service to her people.

CHAPTER IX

THE ha'nted house was hiding its sinister reality under a most cheery and healthful-looking disguise that graying Monday afternoon. Not in all that mountain valley was there to be found a more generous fireplace filled with a more briskly crackling fire. And not anywhere within those encircling hills could be seen such another illumination as streamed from the well-kept glass lamp through the open back door to ensure that White-faced Silas was not shadowing the stable wherein Tony was performing his evening tasks. As a further provision against a visit from the ousted ghostly tenant, John Marshall walked heavily and whistled cheerily as he prepared the evening meal inside, or as he every now and then came to the open door to call encouragement to the boy in the stable.

After a little, Tony came in and closed the rear door behind him.

"You didn't beat me, you scoundrel," was the man's hearty greeting to him. "Supper is ready to put on the table, and it's bully!" The smoking slices of country-cured ham on the broiler before the big log fire, the brown hoe-cakes on the glowing hearth, and the spitting and sputtering coffee near by, offered themselves in enthusiastic support of his claims. In a very short while the edibles were

transferred to a rude pine table which had been drawn up for the purpose, and man and boy drew up their respective chairs opposite each other.

Tony made a long arm for the hoe-cakes before he was fairly seated, but Marshall snatched the plate away tentatively.

"Have you washed your hands?" he demanded. On being answered in the affirmative, he poked the hoe-cakes at the boy, but still hesitatingly. "I'm a good mind not to let you have any for not getting us some fresh butter," he declared. Tony started to protest, but the other stopped him impatiently—"Yes, I know all about the chestnuts, but they *will not* answer. I've told you that a dozen times. Every time I start you out to forage for something to eat you come back with a load of chestnuts or chinquapins! Do I look like a squirrel?"

"I—I—I got your whiskey."

"Well, that's something like. Have a hoe-cake, young moonshiner."

Then man and boy fell to right heartily, and in all too short a time, physiologically reckoned, ate their way through to the dallying, toying stage of the process.

Marshall became reflective. Indeed, anybody else but Tony might have seen, through the whole evening, that there was something on the man's mind. With the stirring of that something, the cloaking cheeriness of his mood now dropped away from him, and his strong face took on lines that might have been the finger-marks of either a callous

hardness or a deep and hidden hurt. After some moments of thought he asked:

"How did you get in so early this evening? Didn't you go home with your teacher?"

"No—o—o."

"Well, why in thunder didn't you?"

"She wouldn't let me."

"Why didn't she let you? I'll bet you gave the whole thing away!"

"Huh?" said the boy, beginning to lose his mental

balance.

"Tony, I'll shake you in a minute! What did she say to you?"

"Oh, her? Why she said—she said ef I was a-goin' to come home with her 'cause I loved her, I might could come; but ef I was comin' 'cause you sont me, I shouldn't."

"Well, you told her you were going because you loved her, of course?"

"Huh?"

Marshall looked up with a quick flash of temper, but restrained himself and repeated his question again and more deliberately.

"No," said Tony, after the import of the inquiry had been dinned into him, "no, i told her you sont me."

"Well, didn't I tell you not to!" The man clutched the loaf of bread in one hand and a carving knife in the other as if threatening to visit upon the scapegoat loaf the wrath that he could ill contain.

"Teacher told me to always tell the truth."

The executioner paused, looked at the boy a few minutes, and then quietly laid bread and knife down upon the table.

There was a period of silence, and then Tony asked, laconically:

"Howcome teacher didn't ride the mare to-day?"

"Teacher's tired of riding," savagely.

"Howcome she sent all them back to you?"—he indicated with a nod a pile of novels on the side table.

"Teacher's tired of reading, you damned fool!"

Another silence in which both man and boy made further headway in the viands, and then the former asked:

"Tony, do people like the teacher better than they used to?"

Tony thought a minute and then replied: "The chilluns likes her."

"Yes, but the grown folks?"

Tony thought another minute and gravely shook his head. "They sho' don't, stranger."

"Why not?"

"I dunno."

"Does Mr. Sykes, the superintendent, like her?"

"He hates her."

"Why?"

"I dunno."

Here the back-log dropped in two, and Marshall busied himself for a space in ramming the noses of the severed chunks together toward the front of the dog-irons and heaving on another immense log

at the back. He seemed to enjoy stamping this into conformity to the space to which he assigned it. When he returned to his seat, he asked of the boy:

"How does she seem to-day?"

"Who?"

"The teacher. Is she—is she—sad?"

"No, mad."

"Oh!"

After Tony had braced up on another huge slice of ham and a hunk of lightbread which he was left to cut for himself, he asked, as if something were on his mind:

"What's 'sad'? Is hit sorter sorry an' droopy-like?"

John Marshall's affirmative nod was accompanied by a quick look of interest.

"Well," said the boy, who could think fairly consecutively when not interfered with, "she was, to say, more snappish than sorry when I told her you said for me to go home with her; but she was sad though—awful sad onct."

"When?"

"When she told me what to tell Uncle Beck 'bout that man dyin'."

"What man?"

"Huh?"

"What man was it that died, Tony?"

"Oh, somebody away from here. Somebody that onct was good to her."

"The man that raised her?"

"Huh?"

"The rich man that took her away from here when she was little and took care of her—her guardian?"

"Guardeen—yes—that's what she called him. He drapped dead t'other day—but he wasn't rich."

"How do you know?" the man was all interest. He leaned forward slightly to get the boy's reply.

"'Cause when I rid over to the store at big recess to tell Uncle Beck what she said—I—she—a—" Tony was drifting again.

"What did you hear at the store?" Marshall asked by way of bringing him back to his moorings.

"Oh, I heerd Mr. Davis a-tellin' Uncle Beck 'bout the man a-dyin', an' he said he hadn't left teacher a cent."

"Which Davis?"

"The one what's takin' notice o' teacher."

"Are you sure he said that?"

"Huh?"

"Are you sure he said that that man didn't leave teacher a cent?"

"Yes, didn't I hear him with my own years?"

The man got up quickly from his chair and strode the length of the room and then back again. "Poor girl, what *will* she do?" he asked half aloud in his solicitous musings; and then—"Yes, by George, I'll buy that place of hers! She must have the money to get away from here!"

"Huh?" Tony asked in questioning answer to his unconscious exclamation.

"Oh, nothing," Marshall replied, impatiently. "Fall to and wash up your dishes now, and get along home."

It was "big recess" time of the following day, and the children had just scattered to the sunny stretches outside to eat their lunches. Mary Elizabeth remained in the school-room, making the keen little wind that was blowing her excuse to be alone for a coveted hour. Morning had come with its usual quota of troubles for the teacher, and this was the first opportunity she had had to-day to take stock of the wreckage left by the storm that had swept over her.

Only last Saturday—three days ago by the calendar that hung on the wall, but ages and ages past, measured by the suffering that had been hers—John Marshall had been discovered by her to be engaged in a villainy deep and mysterious; that night the Hearer of Prayer had failed her and she had defied Him to His face; and day before yesterday—could it be that it was only day before yesterday?—there had dropped out of reach of her tardy gratitude forever the only thing in her life that had proven worth while. Too vast for expression, the pain of it all lay a dead weight on her aching heart as the cruelly slow-paced minutes passed.

Then, almost mechanically, her glance took in the new and hardly yet familiar details of the room in which she sat. All about her were the comforts which John Marshall had placed there for the sake

of the suffering children, yet John Marshall was even then, perhaps, perfecting against them and theirs a nefarious scheme which she, Mary Elizabeth, was forbidden on her honor to disclose to them. It was intolerable—something must be done, something that would force the man to let her speak. She must see him, she must find a way!

As if conjured up by her thoughts, John Marshall at that moment entered the door of the school-room in the wake of a courteous child who was showing him in. The impatient usher did not wait to see that the teacher rose to her feet but remained silent even when the stranger, hat in hand, gave her a formal greeting.

Perhaps the man's ill-concealed, shocked surprise at the change in the girl's face kept him from noticing her neglect to answer him, or, maybe, he purposely ignored it. Anyway, there was no resentment in his quiet, firm voice as he said:

"I have something of importance to say to you. Sit down."

Though distinctly uncompromising, Mary Elizabeth slipped into the chair that stood before the teacher's desk and indicated a seat to the stranger. A thoroughly awakened curiosity veiled in part the deep indignation that was burning in her eyes.

"What is it?" she found herself saying.

"Do you remember that when I first met you, you said that you owned a place over the ridge that used to belong to your father, and that you wanted to sell it?"

"Yes," quietly, but her eyes were darkening ominously.

"Well, I have come this morning to tell you that if you still want to sell, I will give you your cash price for it."

"Do you take me for a child? For worse?" she flashed out before his last sentence was well out of his mouth.

"I don't understand you."

"You mean that you are counting on my not understanding you! So it's *my* place, is it, that is the one of all the lot which the owner holds good titles to? And *I* am the person that you have 'on the string'? Did you think that I could forget the phrasing of that infamous letter, and so soon as this?"

For fully a minute he did not speak; he was making a visible effort to control himself, and Mary Elizabeth was suddenly conscious of a queer little feeling of fear at his power of self-repression. When Marshall did speak, his voice was under his control. He picked up a pencil that lay near and drew toward him a sheet of paper. He was leaning toward her that he might use part of the desk space for a hard surface upon which to draw.

"If you will suspend judgment for a while," he said through compressed lips, "I will show you what I am doing here and prove to you that you are fighting windmills." He began to trace a crude drawing on the paper. Mary Elizabeth's curious glance oscillated between the paper under his hand and the face of the man, which was in profile toward her and quite

near. She caught herself marking the fine, strong outline of the face, and feeling a keen interest, through the oblique but near view she commanded, in the fire that she had kindled in his eyes.

"To begin with," he said, "this valley that we are living in is just a little concavity scooped out of the top of one of the highest plateaus in the State. It is surrounded by a ridge with only one break—at the falls that we visited together—and contains a half-dozen of the boldest springs in the country which together furnish a remarkably fine supply of water. I purpose to buy up this depressed region—about five miles in length—dam the break at the falls, and convert the whole valley into a reservoir in which shall be stored water for all-the-year-round usage." He looked up into her face for a moment as if speculating as to whether to proceed or not, and said, parenthetically, "I am putting myself into your hands, you see." Then he returned to his drawing, and continued: "I expect to regulate this water-power and use it to generate electric power which will supply all the needs of a model manufacturing city to be located twenty miles south of here where two prospective railroads are to cross another already in operation, and where materials are at hand for the manufacture of steel. Now that is my nefarious scheme. This place of yours that we are discussing is not in the valley at all and is not in any way necessary to the furtherance of our project. I need absolutely only the land which I am to submerge, and a few acres at the falls on which to locate a power plant. Your

father's place is two miles east of this spot." The explanation finished, he moved a little away from her and looked at her as if he expected her to understand.

"Then what do you want with it?"

She was sharp enough to see that her quick question disconcerted him in a degree.

"Why, I shall use it for the site of a workmen's camp, I suppose."

"Mr. Marshall," said the girl, deliberately, and her voice was strange to him as she answered him, "I am not the same girl I was when I talked to you that first morning. I am not now fighting to get rid of the responsibility which has been laid upon me, and I have found out somehow that there are debts which cannot be paid in money. I am not the selfish—and—cowardly girl I was that day. I am a woman, and the woman in me is going to stand her ground." The man drew a deep breath and the expression in his eyes softened. "I am going to stand my ground against you," she concluded, "and refuse your covert bribe to silence."

Marshall rose from his chair. There was on his face the look that had frightened her in that last interview.

"I have no words with which to answer that from a woman," he said.

He was going. He was moving toward the door. Mary Elizabeth suddenly remembered that she had determined to force him to release her from her obligation to her own sense of honor and let her make one effort to save the homes of her people.

"Mr. Marshall."

He turned in his tracks and paused, but he did not answer her. Mary Elizabeth rose and came a step or two nearer him.

"On what conditions will you let me speak—let me tell what I read——?"

"On whatever conditions are imposed by your own sense of honor," and he left her with never a look backward.

"When air you a-goin' to go 'way?" It was Tony who had found her in her indignation and despair.

"I don't understand you, Tony. Go away from the school-house, do you mean?" She was too wrought up to wonder at his sudden presence.

"No, go 'way f'm here—'way off an' not come back, mebbe?"

"Why, I am not going at all—ever."

Heaven opened in the child's clouded face—"Why, *he* said you was."

"Who said I was?" the girl was fairly startled at the guess she made.

"Mr. Marshall—him what was in here to see you jes now."

"Mr. Marshall said *what*, Tony? Think hard and tell me the very words he said."

But Tony couldn't think.

"When was it, dear?"—patiently.

"Las' night."

"Where?"

"Up to his house."

"How did he come to say anything about me?"

"He was pestered 'cause I told him your gardeem had done died an' hadn't lef' you no money."

"O Tony!"

"Yes, he *was* pestered, too," he declared, protesting against what he took for scepticism in her face:

"He was awful pestered, 'cause he jumped up outen his cheer an' walked up an' down the f'or lookin' that worried, an' sayin'—an' sayin'——"

"Saying *what*, Tony?" desperately.

Suddenly a ray of light came: "Poor girl, what *will* she do?" the boy repeated mechanically, and all unconsciously imitating Marshall's very tone of voice. Mary Elizabeth was very white and quiet when she asked again:

"What was it Mr. Marshall said about my going away?"

"Oh, yes"—the light was coming steadier now—"he was a-talkin' to hisse'f-like, an' he said he was goin' to buy sump'n f'm you so you might could have the money to go 'way f'm here—teacher!—teacher!—be you sick?"

CHAPTER X

MARY ELIZABETH had scarcely finished pinning a note in Tony's jacket, when the door of the school-house opened and admitted Uncle Beck. There was a flutter of excitement among the kept-in children, and the little teacher's face flushed with pleasure, for in all that country around there was no one man so much loved and esteemed, so always welcome, as the genial, kindly store-keeper.

Mary Elizabeth knew that he was there in answer to her unexpressed call for sympathy, so she hurried through the penitential tasks she had imposed on the kept-ins and sent them on their way rejoicing, that she might have a long, undisturbed chat with Uncle Beck.

When the door was shut on the last hurrying urchin, she turned to the old man. Uncle Beck sat poking the fire and punching down the ashes as if it were his one business in life.

"Wa-al, Purty," he said cheerily as she took a seat beside him, "the best thing to do for a man that's in trouble is to feed him. You womenfolks ain't built that way, but I 'lowed a little sump'n sweet would help you up a bit." He was feeling in his great sagging pockets, and soon brought out two big red apples and a generous package of stick candy. "You always was crazy 'bout the peppermint kind 'cause hit was striped," he reminded her. He searched

again and this time produced a yellow paper sack of something.

"Guess what," he commanded.

"Tea-cakes—scalloped tea-cakes," she exclaimed, her eyes answering his expectant smile.

"Now ain't that like her!" he chuckled with delight.

"Like who?"

"Like the little freckle-face gal what used to swing her bare legs from my counter an' give me orders about the kind she wanted—the settin' up, too, mind you!—Like the little gal what went away from here an' never come back."

"But she did come back, Uncle Beck," and she laid one hand on his rough shoulder.

"Whar's them freckles, I'd like to know?" he demanded with mock suspicion.

"I took them off."

"The name o' nation!"

"Yes, I did," and she smiled at his undisguised astonishment. "I put a strong medicine on my face that took all the skin off, and the freckles came with it."

"*Nachully!* But did you mean to do it?"

"Why, of course."

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, I always did sorter b'lieve that Providence was jes prarkin' with us when He made women." He took the pointed chin of the girl between his thumb and forefinger and raised her head up for a better look into her face. "I wonder ef He ra-ally did mean you to be took in earnest."

"My guardian took women in earnest. He took me in terrible earnest." She looked past Uncle Beck to the bleakness of the winter scene outside.

"I was mighty sorry to hear 'bout him a-dyin', Ma'y 'Lizbeth." He had warded off the painful subject as long as he could, after the manner of men. "He was mighty good to you, wa'n't he?"

The girl's face paled. "I am just beginning to understand how good," she said, quietly.

Uncle Beck got very busy punching down the ashes again. When he straightened up he said in a more cheerful tone:

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, hit ain't that I'm uncarin' when I talk 'bout business so soon, but I'm mighty anxious to know how he left you pervided for. Babe Davis said—hit's your 'Uncle Beck' what's astin the question, honey——"

"He didn't have anything to leave, Uncle Beck. But I can work, you know; I don't mind that." And she smiled tenderly as she echoed the beloved sobriquet.

"Too bad, too bad," and he gave the ashes another vigorous punching.

"If you don't stop that we won't have any fire left!" said the girl firmly. The old man desisted promptly, but he had got the courage he was playing for.

"Honey," he said, looking at her gravely, "have you got any money left?"

"Left from what?"

"Didn't he send you money regerlar?"

"No, he offered to, but I told him I would make my salary do, and would not be a burden to him any longer. That pleased him very much. It was not that he cared for money—he gave away all he made—but he said that the struggle would develop me."

"Wa-al, he hadn't ought to——"

"Yes, he ought, Uncle Beck."

"You ain't answered me, Ma'y 'Lizbeth."

"Oh—I have a dollar and sixty cents, I think."

"You ain't got no other dependence but jes that an' what you git for teachin'?"

"Well, my salary is enough."

"Yes, a plenty for present purposes, child, but ef anything should happen—ef you was to be took bad sick or anything like that——"

"Oh, I'd manage some way."

"You'd come to me, I hope."

"I wouldn't go to anybody. I am going to be absolutely independent. And more than that, I am going to pay to those who need it what Mr. Fenwick spent on me. I feel now that that was really the way he always intended to have me pay him."

The old man looked worried; but the gentle smile was not long out of his eyes, and after a moment or two he said, quizzically:

"You've got what I call 'enlargement of conscience,' Ma'y 'Lizbeth. I hope it ain't ketchin'."

"Well, Uncle Beck, isn't it my duty to do what I can?"

"Hit's your duty to do what you can, but not what you *can't*. Ma'y 'Lizbeth, thar's a diff'rence be-

tween the two that some folks don't always appreciate. Now jes you go slow, honey; the responsibility ain't all yourn."

The girl looked thoughtful for a moment but then said with her old emphasis:

"As much of the responsibility is mine as I can possibly carry, Uncle Beck; that is the faith he taught me."

The old man had grown grave. He was visibly troubled, and started to say something, but hesitated. The next moment he shifted to his placating mood again and said:

"Wa-al, honey, we'll both of us know more when we're older. But goin' back to the subject of freckles: I'm pleased to know that you've had some little experience in skinnin' people alive, b'cause you need it in your business."

"What do you mean, Uncle Beck?"

"I mean that you've jes nachully got to take the hide off'n some o' them big boys. You've got to lick 'em, gal, an' the sooner you git down to it, the better hit'll be for all concerned."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Uncle Beck. You just ought to come and see how well they mind me. Why, there's not a single one of them that would deserve a punishment like that even if it were right to give it to him."

"Sh-h-h, honey, don't you never let nobody but your Uncle Beck hear you say a thing like that! 'Right to give hit to him'! Why, child, you'll be a-sayin' sassafras tea ain't good for 'em next! Now

you don't understand me. Hit ain't any question whether or not them hulkin' fellers is doin' any one certified thing callin' for a lickin'. The real question is that you got to break their sperits, you got to tromple on 'em a bit; hit's a good tonic for 'em."

The girl looked at him quickly with reproach in her glance. She didn't see the twinkle in his eyes for the mist that rose in her own.

"Uncle Beck, I wouldn't have thought it of you!" was all she could say.

The old man leaned forward and tapped her on the wrist several times with the new plug of tobacco he had taken from his pocket.

"See here, child," he said, very earnestly now, "hit ain't *me*. Ef you've got any patent way o' makin' a man outen a boy 'thout lickin' him, I'm agreeable. But the people ain't satisfied—they ain't got much faith in anything but the old reliable. Mister Sykes has been spreadin' hit around—I'm tellin' you this for your own good, Ma'y 'Lizbeth—that you let Tony Thaggin miss an' miss an' miss, without ever hittin' him a lick for it. Understand, I don't b'lieve hit, child, but other people do."

"Uncle Beck, Tony isn't normally bright, you know." The old man nodded slowly, and she continued: "Tell me one thing: Is Mr. Sykes any sort of judge of work like mine?"

"He's sup'rintendent of schools for this county, Ma'y 'Lizbeth."

"Yes, but he won't be long!"

"You goin' to root him out, kitten?"

"I certainly am!"

"Go slow, honey, go slow."

"Well, Uncle Beck, answer me straight out now—do you think Mr. Sykes has any sense?"

The old man twirled his thumbs over each other for a long time in silence.

"Do you?" demanded the girl again.

"Wa-al, I was jes tryin' to make my choice o' conclusions," he drawled at last. "You see hit's this way: Ef Sykes is a smart man, then I'm a damn fool, an' ef he's a damn fool, I've got the sense. I'll let you know later what I decide. But he ain't no easy mark, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, don't git that into your head. Only last week he kep' a jury hung for iorty-eight hours an' had a mistrial declared at last. He told me in confidence that he turned down eleven of the contrariest men he ever sot his eyes on." The old man waited a minute for an answering smile, then he reached over and patted her gently on the head:

"Hit's time to laugh, Ma'y 'Lizbeth!"

The girl smiled obediently, a little wonderingly, perhaps, but still she smiled. That much concession made, she reverted to her original contention:

"I want you to know that I appreciate your advice, Uncle Beck, but I'll just have to use my own judgment in dealing with Mr. Sykes."

The county superintendent of education disposed of, she abruptly revived a topic which the old man fondly thought he had quashed as between them long before.

"Uncle Beck, why won't anybody ever talk to me about White-faced Silas?"

"Why—most prob'ly 'cause thar ain't nothin' to say 'bout him, I reckon. What is it you partic'lar want to know?"

"Did he have a son, and disown him?—Didn't he?"

"No, he didn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure."

"Well—that can't be it, then," musingly. Then she said, as if to herself: "Yet the house belongs to the heirs of the ghost."

"What you talkin' 'bout, Ma'y 'Lizbeth?"

"I was thinking about the stranger there now."

"Wa-al, you minded me so nice 'bout Mister Sykes, I'm goin' to give you another piece of advice: Don't think too much 'bout that 'stranger thar now.'"

"Why?" she demanded, with her eyes steadily on his own.

"I don't like him."

The girl's lips parted and then closed again in silence. After a little she asked abruptly: "Uncle Beck, how did he get possession of the haunted house?"

Was it consternation that she surprised in his kind old eyes?

"How—how should I know?" he asked in return; but he kept his eyes on hers as he answered: "I do know one thing though, honey, an' that is ye'd better let that old place and ever'thing connected

with hit severely alone. Take my advice in this one thing—for a change."

"Well—and you tell me this one thing—'for a change': What makes Bud Davis hate me like he does?"

"With my two eyes on the purty face of you, child, I couldn't possible guess."

The old store-keeper suddenly found it necessary to get up and go to the window to see if his horse was still standing.

"Dan'l is mighty onruly this cold weather," he explained.

"Then it must be against your rules for Dan'l to go to sleep, for that's what he's doing every time I see him," declared the girl with a quick touch of temper. "No, it's just your way of putting me off whenever I ask you anything."

The old man turned round suddenly, facing her, but his back was to the strong light.

"Look here, gal, don't you dispute my word! In p'int of fact now, I've always answered ever'thing you ast. You've jes gone an' got the notion into your head that thar's a powerful myst'ry 'bout that old white-faced ha'nt, an' thar ain't. That's the whole of it! Now, in the name o' common sense, what is hit you're a-drivin' at?"

"Nothing," firmly and finally.

"Jes what I 'lowed!"

But in a moment or two he went over to the sulking girl, and, taking his seat beside her, put his kindly old hand on her brown hair. "Le's make up,

honey. Your Uncle Beck is jes plumb weak about you, ef he does have to scold you sometimes."

The girl put one soft little hand on his own, and the old man continued, with a smile:

"Speakin' o' quarrellin', Ma'y 'Lizbeth, did you ever hear 'bout the hard feelin's that was stirred up here onct 'bout that coffin?"

"Why, what coffin, Uncle Beck?"

"The coffin Dilsey Sellers bought for her step-mother what was Melissa's second cousin," said the old man, playing for her interest. "You see the whole trouble was that Dilsey was a little too previous, for the old lady wasn't good dead, though she was mighty nigh onto hit. Hit was when the old woman was at her sickest that Dilsey went to Simpkinsville to sell her cotton, an' up an' come back with the coffin. Hit seems that Dilsey wa'nt so much to blame as you might think, for while she was in town she seen a mighty takin' show-winder whar they was offerin' coffins dirt-cheap, an' besides, the store-keeper told her thar never was such another cut in coffins sence the world begun an' never would be ag'in, and that that was jes nachully her last chance. So Dilsey got excited-like an' bought one of the onery thing an' come a-drivin' home with hit in the waggin.

"Wa-al, sir, old Mis' Sellers was the maddest sick 'oman you ever sot your two eyes on! She told Dilsey right up an' down that she was a-goin' to git well jes to spite her; an' she riz up from that bed, then an' thar, an' never went back to hit except for to sleep at night, an' a mighty hard time they had a-gittin'

her to do that, at first. An' ef you'll b'lieve me, she got plum well an' fat—so fat that she outgrewed the coffin. When hit got to that pass, Dilsey stopped speakin' to her, an' she had to go way over in Walker to live with a grandchild o' hers by her first husband."

"But what in the world did poor Dilsey do with the coffin, Uncle Beck?"

"Kept hit, of course. Dilsey ain't rich enough to th'ow away seventeen dollars and ninety-eight cents. Wa-al, she didn't have no place to put hit whar hit wouldn't show hit's bull-necked self an' skeer folks, so she slid hit under the bed to keep her dirty clo'es in. They say Lil—she's the blind one, you know—is might' nigh crazy 'bout hits bein' thar in the house, an' thinks she runs ag'in hit ever' way she turns. When Dilsey starts to go off an' leave Lil by herself she leads her up to the bed an' makes her stoop down an' put her hand on the coffin to show her that hit's safe outen her way; but all the same, Lil says, Dilsey ain't more'n out o' hearin' before the thing gits out in some way an' is under her feet ag'in."

"Oh, horrors! Why doesn't Dilsey throw the awful old thing away?" the girl asked, aghast.

"Why, Dilsey can't afford hit. You see she's a-keepin' hit, lookin' to the time when one o' the neighbors will need hit an' she'll git her money back. But la, honey! The presence o' that thar coffin has acted like a course o' bitters to the whole passel of us. We've been the wellest bunch you ever sot eyes on ever sence hits arrival amongst us—all, that is, except Grandma Thaggin, an' she declares hit's too

short for her by a good three inches, ef Dilsey got anything like a decent fit for her ma."

"And is it that which makes Dilsey so unpopular?" Mary Elizabeth asked.

"Wa-al, Dilsey is one o' them people that's born unpop'lar, honey, but of course this here coffin scrape set her back still further. Hit's left her in a delicate siterwation with the neighbors, so to speak. You see the people, 'specially the small-sized ones, can't help suspicionin' her when she asts *how they feel*, an' thar air them what wouldn't eat a meal o' her victuals for the world."

"Uncle Beck, you don't treat the poor thing that way, I know!"

"Lord no, child, I'm a good six inches longer than any Sellers I ever seen!"

The shadows had been charmed away from the deep-blue eyes of the girl, so the old man gathered his legs together and rose to go.

"Dan'l is wakin' up, so I'll have to be goin', child."

As the girl rose to say good-by and stood for a moment with both hands grasping the lapels of his overcoat, he took a tender hold of each of her wrists and looked deep into her eyes.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth," he said with concern, "I'm in dead earnest 'bout this here school business. I want you to ac' harsher to them boys—you kin do it all right ef you jest let that thar temper go. An' listen to me: I want you to make up to Mister Sykes, you jest *can't afford* to make a enemy out o' him!"

CHAPTER XI

WHEN John Marshall tethered his horse to a sapling near the school-house the next afternoon, he found himself a few minutes early, for the children were just then trooping down the steps and turning faces north, east, south, and west toward home. While waiting for them to disperse, the man took from his pocket a little folded paper that Tony had delivered to him the evening before, and unfolded it and read again:

I hardly hope that you will respond to this, but I am very anxious to see you, and wish you would come to the school to-morrow at four o'clock.

MARY ELIZABETH DALE.

He refolded and replaced the note as the last tow-headed urchin decamped down the big road.

The teacher had come to the door to see the children off, and now stood on the threshold in the golden rays of the declining sun—an all-unconscious study in the beautiful. The yellow radiance waked a deep and glowing response from the heavier meshes of her dark hair, and burnished to gold the crest of every glossy wave, the airy spiral of every truant curl. Her delicate lips were warmer to-day, and warmer the light in her violet eyes.

The poet-painter would have sung or painted the

spirit incarnate in and dominating the beautiful self of her as she shaded her eyes with one hand and looked long and longingly adown the yellow distance—looked for one, only whose outward seeming she felt could ever come again.

But John Marshall was neither poet nor painter. He was just a man, and he saw with the eyes of a man. A warm flush overspread his habitually cold features, and a refining something smoothed away the suggestion of cruelty which sometimes marred the strong lines of his mouth. As he now came out of the pine thicket which had hidden him from view and presented himself before her, he looked much like the man with whom she had spent many a halcyon afternoon exploring the radiant woodways and whatever thoughtways a man and a maid may travel together.

Mary Elizabeth did not extend her hand, and Marshall only removed his hat and answered formally her own formal greeting as he followed her into the school-house.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," she said, signing him to a chair near the glowing stove.

"You mean you knew that I would."

Mary Elizabeth looked at him quickly, but his eyes had nothing to say to her. He stood waiting for her to be seated. When the two had taken seats before the comfortable fire, the girl said, but with very evident hesitation:

"I did you an injustice yesterday."

Marshall turned and looked straight into her eyes.

There was a question in his own, but he did not put it into words. He waited for her to speak further.

"I didn't know then—that—that"—he might have helped her, but he didn't, not even when a pained flush crept up from her slender throat, and big threatening tears filled her deep eyes—"I didn't know then why you wanted to buy it!"

The man, who had been watching her every change of expression, suddenly leaned forward for a keen look into her face.

"What do you know now?" he asked.

"That you don't want it at all but are just trying to give me the money so I can get out of all this." Something in her voice seemed to unnerve him.

"Whoever said that told a falsehood!" he exclaimed vehemently.

"Then you told one yourself."

"I never said that to a single soul. How on earth did you get such a notion into your head?"

The girl had wiped away the too imminent tears and was making a brave effort to meet his deeply concerned eyes.

"Then that parrot Tony must have picked up what was an unconscious exclamation with you, when he told you the other night about Mr. Fenwick's death and about his not having left me anything."

Marshall tried to break in, but she wouldn't let him. "And yesterday, after—after—I had so misjudged you, and let you go away, Tony came in and told me what you had said—and—and I wrote you to come. I—I—wanted to tell you I was sorry." Her

hands were over her face now but something shining dropped from between her fingers.

The man watched the heaving of her bosom in desperation. He put out his hand once as if to touch the white fingers that were pressed to her eyes, but he drew back, and ended, as he usually ended his tense moods, by taking a quick turn up and down the room. When he had spent his nervousness he stopped behind the bench on which the girl was seated and leaned over her with his arms extended along the back of it as if to shelter her.

"Child," he said, "nothing, nothing in the world is worth your tears. It's all right—what you said to me. I don't mind it a bit now. You just didn't understand; and you don't understand other things which have made you bitter against me. But some day you will, and—and then it will be all right between us. Little girl——"

"Make me understand *now!*" There was passionate appeal in her voice as she answered him. A new mood was upon her. She dried her eyes now and flung back the tendril curls from her face. She was leaning toward him, but the fading daylight and flickering fire rendered uncertain the thing that was deepest in her eyes. "*Make me understand.*" One restless little hand was on his coat-sleeve now, and he was fain to answer its appeal.

"Why," he said uncertainly, "you know so little of business methods I'm afraid I can't." But the appealing touch was still on his arm and he had to make the effort. "Now this is the situation: The

ancestors of these people took up their abode here on lands which belonged to the Creek Indians but which were shortly ceded by the Creeks to the government. They did not establish legal claims to their homesteads. And, still without legal claim, their descendants have continued to squat on the land, rent-free, and tax-free, vegetating here, and blocking the advance of progress. Ten years ago I conceived the project I explained to you yesterday of buying up the whole tract from the natives. I did not then know that a large part of the land was government property, but I did know, however, that the titles to some of the farms I bought were shaky. I was willing to risk something to get a foothold here, so I traded through my agents with every property owner who could be induced to sell, even buying shaky titles with the hope of ultimately steadying them on their legs. This trading had to be done quickly, because it is characteristic of the hillite to take panic at any sort of land trade. My agents had their orders to buy outright all that could be bought, for the deeds would be good at least as quitclaims, and would satisfy the people themselves, as well as put it out of their power to balk the enterprise. I was going to straighten out titles later——"

The appealing touch was removed from his coat-sleeve, and the man seemed to find it harder to continue—"But some of them did take panic in spite of all our precautions, and refused point-blank to sell at any price. This man, 'Bud Davis,' gave my agents a great deal of trouble, and was, together with

Trav Williams, finally instrumental in frightening them away. Since that time I have put first one agent and then another on the job, but only to have each one come and merely take a look at the situation and then show it a fair pair of heels. Lastly, I came myself. Of course none of them connect me with these earlier land-deals as my name was kept out of them and they have never seen me before."

The listening girl had straightened up, and the little movement suddenly seemed to put her immeasurably far away from him. The winter twilight was creeping around them, and the dying fire no longer lighted her fathomless eyes.

"Well," continued Marshall, with a deep-drawn breath, "I soon found out that nearly all the land I had been unable to get hold of was public land and belonged to a tract that was open to entry. I then set about buying up what is known as military-bounty land warrants and having them located on this land, paying the government the difference in the values." And with a sudden tightening of the lips he concluded:

"I am paying Uncle Sam and the warrant holders for it, and the squatters may go hang. If they had taken my offer, years ago, they would have got a fair market price for what they hadn't the shadow of a claim to."

"Make me understand." It was not the trembling lips that had spoken again, but only a pleading gesture. The tone of the man's voice had changed when he took up the story again:

"Where the titles were good, I paid all that they were worth, and paid also, in some instances, extortionate prices for lands whose titles were not then established. Some of these tracts I shall have paid for twice—once to the squatter claimant and once to the warrant holders"—and then with a reversion to his old mood again—"but that was because I was a fool at first in my hurry to gain possession. If the Davises and their ilk get anything out of me, I'll know it."

"Do you really mean that you are going to take these people's homes away from them?" She seemed to speak to him from an infinitely remote distance.

"No, I merely mean that I am going to buy from the government property which belongs to it, and then require the people who have had illegal enjoyment of it for generations to move off and make way for civilization."

"But you are going to pay them for their lands?"

"No, I am going to pay the rightful owner for the lands. These people had their chance to skin me, but they have lost it."

"Yes, but who is the rightful owner? Who is the rightful owner?" she urged desperately. "In the last analysis, doesn't the land belong to the one who conquers it—conquers it from wild men and wild nature?"

"Why," he replied, looking up quickly as if to assure himself that it was really this slim girl creature that had challenged, "why, I suppose that in the last

analysis, land doesn't really belong to anybody, but is the property of the race."

"Then by what right do you propose to usurp this great tract of it?"

"By the right of the strongest, I suppose."

"The world—even *your* world—will never sanction such a principle as this!"

"It countenances the practice every day."

"But if they—if these people—should prove the stronger?"

"Then the world would roll comfortably over to their side by a simple law of ethical gravitation peculiar to itself."

"And there is a chance for them?" The leaping flame from a freshly fallen brand in the stove answered the spring of fire to the eyes of the girl. She was leaning toward Marshall now with an appeal that he could not withstand.

"Yes, there is one chance," he answered, slowly.

"What is it?" her lips were parted with expectancy. She all but laid her hand on his breast in her eagerness for his reply.

Marshall looked deep into her eyes for a moment, and then asked:

"Is this honorable warfare?"

The fire died out of the beautiful eyes as quickly as it had kindled. The man looked troubled.

"Try to see it in the right light," he urged. "It is the history of all progress that the weak, the ineffectual, go down before it—it is their punishment for being ineffectual. No, hear me out," he protested,

as her lips parted to interrupt. "This is an inevitable change. These people must submit or break under it. Those of them who have given way and accepted the conditions of change will ultimately reap the benefits that follow as its natural results. Those who oppose themselves to it must go down before it."

"But this is not 'an inevitable change,'" the girl pleaded. "Just suppose, for instance, that you were to agree to what I beg of you and leave them undisturbed, to work out for themselves a civilization which would make, without breaking them."

But the man replied: "Even if I were to listen to you, they would not then be left free, but would only be the prey of the first exploiter who was not so weak as to let a woman unman him. See here, these people are *not* the owners of the lands. They themselves are the usurpers, and they are in danger of being dispossessed any day. Try to understand that." If she made the effort she seemed not to have succeeded, for she asked in the very next breath:

"But there is one way out of this, you said?"

"Yes, there is always one way—in the hills."

The girl answered his quick, searching glance with the reflective, questioning look of one who has failed to comprehend, and then the man took up his theme again.

"Look at the matter dispassionately for a moment. These people have been here for generations, and they have not in all that time worked out for themselves any degree of civilization which is worth while. You know that, yourself. Now what they need, and

what they must have, is a stimulus from the outside. If they are forced out of their intrenchments here, they will be brought into direct contact with modern progress. A railroad centre, such as we purpose to build about twenty miles south of here, will wake up the whole district. Manufacturing plants will be erected in which the people and their children can find work. They will be brought into contact with everything which educates—which civilizes. Why, it is the very best thing that could happen to them!"

"Is this your *motive* or your *excuse*?" Mary Elizabeth had a strange feeling that it was not herself who had spoken, but that ever-present other.

For fully a minute, silence and a deepening twilight intervened between questioner and questioned; then John Marshall deliberately opened the door of the heater, stirred the sluggish fire to flame again, and turned for a sharp survey of the girl's face.

"Is it your motive or your excuse?" Mary Elizabeth echoed.

"It is my justification," the man answered her.

"But your motive?" she urged.

"Have you any right to put that question?"

"If you haven't the courage to answer it, let's say that I haven't the right."

Marshall's face was suddenly overspread with a deep flush. "I am doing it for the money that is in it," he replied, defiantly.

"And the hearts that you break?"

"Business gives little consideration to broken

hearts"—and then, with a smile that made her shrink inwardly, "but it often has to take broken heads into its accounting."

Mary Elizabeth rose to her feet, and the visitor was fain to follow her example. There was a long silence between the two, and then the girl said, very quietly:

"You have not made me understand."

"Well, why should you?—Oh, I didn't mean that. Little girl—little woman—I'm not all brute! I meant—I meant—good God! I don't mean anything but that I love you! I *love* you! Do you understand *that*?" He would have caught her to him, but the girl broke away, and stood trembling before him with again the something in her eyes which the firelight had not the power to interpret.

"I love you," he pleaded. "And I want to save you from yourself. I want to save you from the despair that your mistaken ideals will condemn you to. You are trying to fight out single-handed the battle of the ages, child. You are trying to settle, with your woman's strength, a contest that involves on the two sides of it the sum total of the fighting strength of the race. Give it up, and let the victory go, as victories always have gone, as they always will go, to the strongest. Give it up, little girl, and let me do the fighting for the two of us. I love you—darling, I *love* you! Come to me, believe in me—and trust to the future to understand!"

The flickering flame dropped low. The two of them were face to face in the faintly illumined shadow.

"Come!" he repeated—and then yet again—"Come!"

The girl raised her head slowly and surrendered her eyes to the summoning power of his own. She took one trembling step forward in answer to the appeal of his outstretched arms, but—all suddenly—a grave-eyed memory stepped between.

With a low cry Mary Elizabeth drew back and covered her face with her hands.

Marshall dropped his arms at his sides as if he, too, recognized that a something compelling had intervened. He stood very still watching her. After a moment or two of silence he touched her on the

The girl looked up in answer. No, she was not crying; the something in her eyes that she had momentarily veiled from . . . was too big for tears.

The school-house door opened noisily on its hinges and admitted the long, gaunt form of Babe Davis.

CHAPTER XII

DAYLIGHT and moonlight blended so softly, so perfectly that Mary Elizabeth could not have told which it was that best lighted her stumbling, unassisted steps as she followed Babe Davis along a strange short-cut home that evening, leaving Marshall to pursue a widely deviating path alone.

There was light enough for the way that she had chosen, but the way itself was hard, and was made harder still by the realization that that other man would have smoothed that other way for her unaccustomed feet. But here was light enough for her progress—a mingled, uncertain light, perhaps, but still enough by which to go forward, so she followed the man of her people.

As she walked on now in silence behind the tall, rugged form of Babe Davis, Mary Elizabeth went over and over again in her mind the meeting of the two men. She could not explain it to herself, for there seemed to be some sort of understanding between them, whereas she had thought them strangers to each other.

She reviewed the meeting in detail now with a conscious effort to solve the enigma, recalling the principals as she had seen them, face to face. She saw again the dark look with which the rustic fixed the other; and she saw, too, the level, open, unwaver-

ing gaze with which the stranger met that look as he went straight up to Davis—our into the fullest light.

John Marshall had extended his hand to the intruder; she remembered, and had spoken as to one whom he knew well; but Babe had drawn back with a growl, while for an instant there was lightning-play across the surface of his obtruding eyes.

Then she herself had spoken to relieve the tenseness of the situation, and Babe had explained that he came to take her home because it was getting so late.

And then it was that she had made plain her final decision and answered with one little sentence all that John Marshall had poured out to her. She had paused a moment on the threshold and, looking back at him, had said simply:

"I am going home. Good-by."

And here she was—she and this type of her people—taking the rough way together by a light that was uncertain at best.

And as she followed she asked: "Babe, why didn't you shake hands with Mr. Marshall?"

Silence.

"Babe, why didn't you shake hands with Mr. Marshall?"

"I dunno," with a growl.

"Babe, do you know anything against him?" she queried.

A long silence, and then: "No."

"Then why didn't you shake hands with him?"

"I dunno."

Suddenly Babe came to a stand-still and slowly removed his soft wool hat.

"What is it?" She came up beside him and saw at his feet a little mound of earth. There was a board standing about a foot high at one end.

"Who is it?" she changed her question to.

"My father."

"Why was he buried here, Babe, so far from the others?" Mary Elizabeth looked away to where she knew the graveyard to be located, some three hundred yards down the valley.

"He said for us to put him here—his conscience was that tender——"

"Uncle Beck told me that he was one of the best men in all this region, Babe."

"Yes, yes, he was good. An' he was quiet an' peaceablelike, an' that kind— You wouldn't a-thought that—" he paused with his eyes on the mound.

"What, Babe?"

"He killed a man. That's why he wanted to be put here, out in the field by hisself."

"Why, Bahe, everybody says that he was so gentle——"

"That was the trouble. The other feller was calculatin' on his gentleness and taxed hit a little too fur."

"What are all these rocks for?" she asked, retreating from a subject that seemed too sacred.

"I been fetchin' 'em here in my wheelborror, from

the cave, to build a wall about hit so nothin' can't tech hit. I can't stand him lyin' out like this. You see, ef I wall hit in good an' strong, thar ain't nothin' can happen to hit."

"Unless the waters cover it!" the girl's sympathetic heart cried out within her.

Tired from her rough tramp, Mary Elizabeth sat down on one of the big rocks that he had brought to protect his dead from desecration, and Babe followed her example.

And there beside the grave of the man whose patience had been taxed once a little too far, the girl asked:

"Babe, how would you like to move away from here?"

"I ain't never to find out how I'd like hit."

"You are never going?"

"No."

"Have you ever thought how you would like living in a city and working in a big factory, or something like that?"

"Wa-al, *he* tried hit onct," and he looked at his father's grave again, "an' they ground the life and sperit outen him—them what was on top—an' all but starved him. So he come back here an' went to work on his own land ag'in what his father had left to him, an' *his* father had left *him*."

"And he loved his land and took a pride in owning it, and in the fact that his father had owned it before him?" the girl questioned, eagerly, "and it was like a part of himself, and stood for his manhood—his independence?"

The sluggish native fired at her quick sympathy, and a deep emotion caused his scraggy throat to fill as he answered:

"He used to say that thar weren't no other way for a man to be a man! What's the matter, Ma'y 'Lizabeth?"

"Oh, nothing."

The next moment a loose stone, unsettled from its position, rolled down from the heap and onto the soft turf that covered the grave. Babe got up instantly to remove the desecrating boulder, and for some minutes busied himself piling up the stones that lay scattered about.

The light was clearer now. What John Marshall had called the prettiest proposition he had ever got his hands on—that peaceful mountain valley—lay under the moonlight, a stretch of darkling, shimmering silver, with never a suggestion of tragedy in all its length and breadth. A little around the slope yonder slept the men who had conquered the wilderness; and here before her, lifting great rocks into place by the giant strength of his gnarled and knotted muscles, was the scion of their hardihood—putting forth all the rugged physical strength that was his, for the sake of a sentiment that burned within him.

And as Mary Elizabeth watched the crude strength of the man—as she read again, by the soft but certain light of the moon now high in the heavens, the look of lofty independence that illumined his grotesque features—she realized, all too poignantly, that there was no other way for this man to be a man.

For here only were industrial foes such as he could grapple with and conquer; here only, for him, the exercise of his masculine, dominant spirit of independence; here the honored footprints of his forefathers; and here his altar fires.

But this man must go down; and John Marshall would say that it was his punishment for being "ineffectual." "Ineffectual!" the phrase so almost convincing, when fresh from the lips that were touched with cruelty, now re-echoed in the heart of the girl with a different ring. "Ineffectual" to what end? Perhaps to John Marshall's purpose of crushing the many that he and his favored few might reap wealth and power; but not ineffectual here in fulfilling the divine purpose, the up-building of—"character"! The last word seemed to be supplied to her from without herself. It was as if he had said it—that memory of a man!

And he had said it. She remembered now the words that he had spoken to her so many, many months ago: "Not wealth, nor power, nor culture, not religious conviction itself is worth while except as it reacts on the character of its possessor."

When Babe Davis came back and resumed his seat on the boulder near her, he had suddenly become to her at once the embodiment of the cause which she was so fiercely championing, and the archetype of the people whom it had become hers to defend. The disaster which she knew this sweeping away of the old order would wreak in the spirit of this man, was magnified by its imminent nearness into disaster to

all of the community who would be subjected to the change; and his native nobility of character, by a like nearness of perspective, became to her representative of all her people, and the natural, typical product of the life they lived. So when the big, rough, but nobly gentle man took his seat—a little below her this time—a little nearer to her feet—the girl had accepted the cup that seemed pressed to her lips, and had determined to drink it to whatever dregs of heart-break to herself lay in the last drops of it.

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth," said her companion, in the tone of one recalling another from sleep, "Ma'y 'Lizbeth?"

"Yes, Babe."

"Be you a-goin' to marry him?"

"No!"—and then again and more emphatically, "No!"

"For true, Ma'y 'Lizbeth?"

"Don't we always speak the truth to each other, Babe?" Mary Elizabeth did not see the deep swell of his rugged breast; she only noted an added hesitation in his words as he asked again:

"How long air you goin' to live here?"

"Always."

"I'm mighty glad!" was the simple answer, but the timbre of his deep, rough voice said: "Thank God!" When he spoke again it was to ask, but still hesitatingly:

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, how long did you go to school?"

"About ten years in all. But I didn't study like I should have done. Why?"

"Could you a-learned what thar is in books quicker, ef you had a-studied?"

"What I did learn, yes, in half the time."

"Wa-al, you was little, most of the time. Could anybody what started with grown-up sense and worked awful hard learn hit all—all what you know—ra-al soon?"

"Why, yes, Babe, I don't know much."

"I'm mighty glad."

"You are glad I don't know much?"

"No, I'm glad I kin learn the books quick."

"Oh, Babe, do you want to study? Do you want me to teach you?"

"That'd depend."

"Depend?"

Mary Elizabeth saw his great hand touch timidly and reverently the hem of her dress, and then he said, this time with a mighty struggle:

"I—I—love you."

"Why, Babe!"

"Yes, I do, Ma'y 'Lizabeth, I 'clare 'fore God I do."

"But, Babe——"

"I'll learn all the books, Ma'y 'Lizabeth, I'll learn 'em ever' one! An' hit won't make no diff'rence 'tall to me 'bout your people bein'——" The man caught himself abruptly and stopped.

"My people being what, Babe?"

"'Bout your people—bein'—'bout your people bein'—oh, 'bout 'em all bein' dead, Ma'y 'Lizabeth. Hit wouldn't make no diff'rence to me 'tall. An' I'd——"

"But, Babe, let me tell——"

"Ain't we the same kind o' folks? Ain't we had the same bornin' here?" he interrupted, feverishly.

"Yes, Babe, but——"

"But what?"

"I just *couldn't*."

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, I'll fetch all the water for you."

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"This is mine," he urged, comprehending in a proud gesture the wide clearing in which they were; "I'd build you a house with my own hands on the land that my father worked, and his father before him."

"No, no, Babe!"

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, I wouldn't let ma an' Bud set they foot on the place, ef you didn't want 'em to."

"But I *couldn't*!"

"You think you couldn't now, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, but after you'd done larnt me the books hit would all be even up between us—an'—an'—mebbe——"

"Babe," she said, with a sudden fierce determining, "Babe, you must give up this thought for always. I can't marry anybody. I am going to devote my life to doing the thing that I am here for. I am going to do my duty by my people."

The girl started. Was it a hoarse, smothered sob that she heard as he turned away? She laid both hands on his shoulder. "Babe," she said tenderly.

But he drew away from the touch of her hands. "I know what it is," he said, hoarsely; "you think I

can't learn books!" He got up and strode away proudly, stopping shortly with arms folded, but with his head bowed. Mary Elizabeth followed him with hurried steps. She went straight up to him and placed both hands on his arm.

"Babe," she said, pleadingly, "it isn't that, believe me. You are the best and noblest man I know, and you have the wisdom that counts the most. It isn't that, Babe. It is—" in his eyes still was hurt beyond expressing, and the girl said, with sudden desperation, "it's because my own heart is broken. I love John Marshall—and—I have had to give him up."

Dazed at first, and almost unhearing, the man regarded her for a moment with an expression in the density of which seemed to mingle flickerings of mad triumph and a something more ignoble still; and then an overwhelming tenderness, before which all thought of self gave way, swept over his rugged face. He was not awkward or self-conscious now as he took both her cold little hands in his own in self-forgetful pity.

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, honey, what's the trouble? Don't he love you yet?"

"Yes, he loves me—in his way."

The man kindled to fierceness in the space of a moment: "An' ain't his way the honest way?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes, yes! It's not that. It's in his own supremely selfish way. Not like you, Babe, not like you!" The moonlight did not show the sudden

rebound to hope in the eyes of him as he answered, eagerly:

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, ef you would only let me show you how much——"

But the girl stopped him. "You can show me how much, Babe, by believing what I tell you, and by being to me what you have been from the first, my trusted friend. Oh, Babe, I need you! I need you as you were to me before. The others here hate me, and they are making it cruelly hard for me—oh, you don't know how much I need a *friend!*"

The strong grasp on her fingers grew infinitely tender. "You've got one, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, right here. I ain't never goin' to peaster you, honey, no more. I ain't never goin' to think about myse'f ag'in. I'm goin' to think about you—I'm goin' to think about you."

The moon still afforded sufficient, if uncertain, light to guide their footsteps as they made their way home. And by the uncertain inner light that was hers as they went, Mary Elizabeth thought out the problem before her to its bitter conclusion:

John Marshall was a wicked man, and she had been wicked to treat with him for even a minute, to listen to his smooth "business" sophistries. She owed it to her people never again to listen to his specious arguments against their interests; she owed it to herself never again to allow him to profane to her the sacred name of love by protestations of his wholly selfish passion.

The soft light of the waning moon rested upon

the girl's uplifted countenance like a benediction as she finally determined to break off all intercourse with John Marshall, now and forever; but a little later, the one board shutter of the porch-room had been drawn close, and Mary Elizabeth was face downward in the black dark.

CHAPTER XIII

THE next evening, when the lights blended together again, hiding the margin where day slips into night, John Marshall was far from the little school-house where Mary Elizabeth had bidden him "good-by," and well out of the life of which it was the centre. He had ridden hard for the last two hours, but now, his journey being practically accomplished, he reined his horse into a walk, and relaxed his own nerve tension.

The man was thinking—thinking of a certain scene, in a certain little school-room, where, between the lights, a girl with wonderful eyes had all but come to his arms. Yes, he could have sworn to it! And then something had come between them, and she had dropped back and covered her eyes. And he had not failed to catch the significance of her parting words as she paused on the threshold and looked back: "I am going home. Good-by."

Could he have been mistaken about that little impulse forward? Had she really almost come to him, or had the uncertain light only betrayed the fierce hope that burned within him? Who could say?

That little note of three lines which was now safely stowed away in his innermost pocket—that brief answer to an impassioned letter he had sent her

almost with the coming light—he repudiated as her reply. It was the girl's fierce loyalty, her fanatical idealism that had dictated: "I am grateful to you for the friendship you have given me in the past, but you must understand that for the future we are enemies." The real self of the girl, the woman with the warm light in her eyes and the tender curves about her perfect mouth, the wonderfully appealing creature that he had surprised in rare moments, had had no part in the penning of those lines! He was sure of it. Then why take that as his answer?

The sudden, determined setting of his mouth was accompanied by a stinging cut to his mount, and the next moment he was riding hard toward his objective.

A few rods more, and he was in sight of the campfires of the men who were laying the foundations for his model city. At first glimpse of the winking lights from the dim distance, the whole man changed. A fire, that had in it no part of tenderness nor yet of passion, suddenly swept through his veins. Something big possessed him—something so big that for the moment it left no space for any other feeling whatsoever—something which had in it the primal love for adventure and exploration, the wild joy of discovery, and the all-conquering, masculine passion for creating, for achieving.

He was down in the plains now, nearly twenty miles south of the little mountain cup known as "Bullus Valley"—down where two railroads, shortly to be built, were to cross a grand-trunk line long in operation; down where "the interests" were already

building a three-million-dollar steel plant, and cotton mills of gigantic proportions; down where he, John Marshall, by the prophetic sense that had been vouchsafed to him, had scooped the fallow acres for a song, and with a company of other daring exploiters was now building, right under the noses of the interests, a model city to be the habitat of their several thousand employees. And never yet had such a city been builded, for it was to be a city ready-made! There were to be ready-made streets; ready-made parks and public squares and civic centres; ready-made schools; ready-made homes; ready-made car lines, banks, stores; and, thanks to Marshall again, minor industries, also ready-made.

Verily something big possessed him as he rode hard toward the accomplishment of his purpose! His purpose—what was it? When the only woman in his world had challenged him to put that purpose into words, his powers of interpretation had failed him, for there was no language common between them that was adequate to express to a woman of her type the moving spirit of a man of his. So, in sheer defiance, he had answered her in the phrasing with which the "rigid righteous" had already damned the motives of his kind: "For the money that is in it." And he had lied.

But he did not know that he had lied, or, rather, he knew it only subconsciously. Because he was keenly conscious of a lack in his scheme of a moral, or a sentimental, purpose when he felt that she was probing him for such, he had swung to the other

extreme in his statement—possibly through the influence of a strong mental suggestion from the woman herself to whom everything was either positively good or positively bad.

He ought to have known himself well enough to realize that he did not care for the wealth which he had already accumulated, that he even despised the sordid power which it bought him among his own. He ought to have known himself well enough to realize that that force which made him, and other like him, often brave even conscience for the sake of gigantic achievement, was the same force that had sent Columbus following the setting sun across a trackless ocean to blaze a way for all that host of big, brave men that were to follow and slay and seize and *build*!

And oh, the glory of that building! The building of huge and powerful cities, the building of colossal fortunes, the building of gigantic business schemes, the building of vast political influences! What matter the cost in money, in men, and in the characters of men!

John Marshall ought to have known that he was the average American slightly enlarged. He ought to have known that, superadded to the average American's ruling passion to get the better of somebody somehow, he had an extra touch of the Anglo-Saxon spirit of pioneer achievement, but with it a lofty scorn of what that spirit brought beyond the very joy of achieving. He ought to have realized that to his slight enlargement over the type was due

the fact that he could see farther than the average—that he had what men commonly call “vision,” and with it the unconquerable restlessness to hurry on to the possibility sighted beyond.

If John Marshall had ever held in leash that restlessness long enough to come face to face with himself and see what manner of man he was, he might better have answered the challenge of the one woman in his world. Instead of saying to her only, “I am doing it for the money that is in it,” he might have added, “and for the striving that is in it, for the joy of achieving that is in it. I am doing it in answer to the age-old spirit of the conqueror that is within me. It is my way of being a man.”

And though the awakened conscience of the woman would have sat in judgment and still condemned, the sleeping instinct in the depths of her nature would have stirred in sympathy; for, by the mystery of life itself, there is no one quality in the man that so unfailingly, so irresistibly, appeals to the woman as that quality which, for want of a better term, we call “force.”

As John Marshall now neared the maze of unfilled sewer-trenches, streets in process of asphaltting, hills being razed, and hollows being filled, upon which rose, complete before his mind’s eye, the city of his hope, a summons came to him along the wind that the man within him leaped to obey. The smell of fried bacon on the cool, crisp air of evening announced that supper was nearly ready at the camp, and the boys would soon be falling to. Selim was dead tired,

but he was fain to respond to the urging of the savagely hungry man who bestrode him, and the two came into camp with a swing shortly thereafter.

Supper was not ready, after all, so Marshall put in the time reviewing the ground—asking questions, giving orders, and commending and condemning, alike with a hearty promptness. Foremen were interviewed at length, and he had a word or two with even the humblest negro laborer.

His advent was the signal for a general thrill of interest throughout the camp. "The Boss" was a man feared and respected by his inferiors, and cordially liked by his equals for something within him which, brutally put, was nothing more nor less than a sublime faith in himself. The world took him at his own evaluation of himself as the world takes always men of his type.

The ground had been pretty thoroughly reviewed by Marshall by the time supper was definitely announced, and he carried to the long board, which was surrounded by thirty other hungry men, an appetite unlesened by any disappointment over what the day had wrought.

At table a surprise had been arranged for him; and, all unknowing, he took the place assigned him without a glance at his nearest neighbor. When a waiting negro pulled out a stool for him, he promptly occupied it and stabbed a slice of bacon through and through with his fork before he realized that the man to his right was laughing at him.

"*Daring!*" and the fork dropped from Marshall's

grasp as he shot out his hand. "Where in the devil did you come from? By Jove, this is a surprise! Howdy, howdy!"

"Why, Doc and I—there's Doc over there on the other side of you—came up for a fishing spree."

Marshall was already shaking the hand of the man on his left with a boyish exuberance that awakened surprise in the men around the table, and caused the gray-haired patriarch of the engineering corps who occupied the head of the board to remark:

"John, makes you think of old times, don't it? Shall we let 'em loaf around here and eat up our victuals?"

"Provided they've left their paints and pills at home, Major," laughed Marshall.

"But they haven't," declared the old man. "The doctor there has only just now been practising on one of the best drivers in camp."

"White or black?" demanded Marshall.

"Black."

"Oh, well, one nigger more or less doesn't count," declared Marshall, and the darkeys who were hurrying 'o and fro in waiting laughed immoderately.

During all the conversation, and furnishing a melodious accompaniment to it, there floated into the tent from a little distance the sound of singing. The negroes not in attendance on the table were gathered together in a group—and wherever there's a group of darkeys, there's apt to be music too.

"Listen!" said the white-haired engineer. "They are improvising." And he turned to the visitor:

"That's their way of telling us what they think of us. They give us ginger-blue sometimes." Everybody paused a moment to listen, and there floated in to them:

"'F I'd a-knowed de boss was so mean,
I never would a-left Saint Augustine!"

"You, Marshall! And your brag Florida niggers at that!" a man across the board exclaimed, and they all shouted with laughter, Marshall not less heartily than the others.

"John," said the Major, when the song of the satirists had died away, "I'm thinking about turning you over to the doctor."

"What's the matter with me, please?" demanded Marshall.

"That's what I want him to find out. Doctor," he continued to the new-comer on Marshall's left, "something's wrong with John's insides—want you to look into the subject."

"From the supper he's laying away, I'd judge that your statement is slightly premature," laughed the young physician, "but what's got into John that——"

"This among other things—we order supplies for him sometimes——" said the Major, stopping him with a gesture. Then he proceeded to read from a paper that he had taken from his pocket and unfolded:

"'Saturday, the seventh, five pounds chocolates; five pounds crystallized fruit.' 'Saturday, the fourteenth, two three-pound boxes best mixed candies.'

'Saturday, the twenty-first, three pounds candied violets—'" the rest of the list was lost in a shout of laughter which, dying away, left the Major explaining:

"Marshall gets his fancy groceries through us, and that's a fair sample of his ordering for the last four or five months. If there ain't something the matter—in one place or another—with the insides of the man who runs a menu like that, then I'm no fit judge of how to feed men, and you'd better turn the commissary over to somebody that knows the business."

The group rose, led by Marshall, who had turned a bronze red but was laughing with the others. For some minutes there was considerable confusion in clearing off the supper things, dragging away the tables bodily, and rearranging the camp-stools.

The big canopy tent under which they had eaten usually served as mess-hall and general sitting-room, too, and as soon as the supper dishes were cleared away, the men drifted together in groups for conversation. Marshall and the two new-comers, together with the patriarch and a bottle-nosed man whom they addressed as "Horton," formed a centre round which the others disposed themselves. Deering had produced a slip of paper from somewhere, and was seemingly idly marking on it as they talked.

In a little while joke and badinage evolved into argument, and argument at length subsided into reminiscence, led by the loquacious Horton. The group gradually grew more unified and gathered closer around a little table that had been placed in their

midst to hold the cigars and liquors. Horton was telling them about John Marshall's daring scheme in the hills, and was describing the neighborhood of "Bullus" Valley so graphically, that one young fellow interrupted with:

"How do you know what it looks like?"

"How do I know?" said Horton, taking a new lease on the general attention. "Why, I camped on the trail of a holding up there once—but I camped off again! That was how Marshall, here, first got the suggestion of his big reservoir scheme. I was describing the peculiar topography of the country to him, years ago, before he got onto this other idea here, and he jumped at once to the conclusion that he would turn the whole valley into a reservoir to furnish some place somewhere with electric power."

"Let's see, that was ten brief years ago, wasn't it?" laughed Dearing, between pencil strokes. One of the surprises to the camp in the new-comer was that he was not at all timid about prodding the rather-to-be-feared Marshall. But when the quick-tempered leader only grinned at the dig, the listeners were distinctly disappointed, and one of them said to the first speaker:

"Tell us how you came to 'camp off' your trail, Horton."

Marshall, who was sitting directly across the little pine table from where Fred Dearing, to his certain intuitive guess, was carefully sketching Horton's bottle-nose on the leaf of a note-book, looked up with interest. He had never heard the details of

Horton's trouble in the mountain, and he now felt a sudden personal interest in them for reasons of his own.

"Well," said the man appealed to, and he liked to hear himself talk, "first one disagreeable little thing and then another happened, but I passed them all over till, one unusually dark night, a party of neighborly fellows dropped around to our place and hanged the man I was bunking with."

"Good God!" Marshall burst out inadvertently, and the crowd shouted with laughter again. The doctor reached across the table with a show of feeling Marshall's pulse, but was warned off by a savage gesture; but the patriarch presumed on a friendship of long standing with:

"Johnny, my boy, you'll never make it! I'm just living to see you come flying down Swindle Hill in the gray dawn some morning, the wreck and ruin of your beautiful scheme behind you, with only your faithful pajamas to bear you company!"

When the roar at his expense had somewhat abated, Marshall rallied to the charge rather hotly: "Well, if you ever see me coming down Swindle Hill in the gray dawn, I'll not have on pajamas——"

"Sure, and why should a man's progress be impeded when he is in such a devil of a hurry! Just take 'em off, John, the country's only sparsely settled in between, and, besides, you're likely to get an unusually early start——"

"Damn it!" Marshall's fist split the frail pine table in descending, but the next moment he joined

in the general laugh. "Look here, boys," he exclaimed vehemently, "I'm in this thing to win or die in the attempt! Nothing on earth is going to stop me but a rifle ball put where it will do the most harm. When you see me coming down that hill in defeat you may get ready to plant me, for I'll be a dead one."

"I bid to be honorary pall-bearer—" began one young fellow, but he was interrupted by another with:

"'Honorary,' the mischief! You've got to help tote the box!"

Dearing, who had risen from his seat with a troubled expression in his eyes, silenced the youngsters with a quick look, and then drifted into a chair beside the patriarch. The men were already talking of other things, and Dearing seized the opportunity to say quietly to the man with the gray beard:

"I'm sorry you all goaded him into taking that position. I came up here to try to make him give up that reservoir scheme. You see, it isn't absolutely necessary to this project here, and he's more than apt to get into serious trouble over it."

"You know Marshall, don't you?" the other replied. "Well, I don't have to tell you then that you'd better not urge that last reason if you really want him to desist."

"Oh, I know him too well for that! But I happen to have what John calls 'sentimental scruples' about the project, and I am going to urge them again. He has flatly refused to listen to me so far, but something

he said in one of his recent letters led me to believe that he might be getting a little dubious about the matter, after all, so I packed my grip and came."

"Didn't sound much like a change of heart—what he said just now."

"No, but there's one good way to bring about a change of heart in a man— Remember those candied violets?"

"Why, you don't tell me—eh!— Sure now? A woman in the case? Lord, but I knew no *man* could eat candy at that rate and live."

"He hasn't said so to me, but he keeps reverting to some girl in his letters. Doesn't seem to be able to get her off his mind. If the worst comes to the worst, I may be able to influence him through her. I mean to give her a dare, anyway."

"Well, well, to think of John Marshall of all men in the world—but they are all alike."

A sudden lull in the hum of voices left one of the youngsters asking in a high key:

"Who on earth succeeded in heading Horton off from finishing that story?"

"Horton ain't headed off," replied that gentleman himself, and he cleared his throat for action. The group came to attention. It was Marshall who gave the raconteur the cue for resuming: "Start at the beginning and let's have a connected narrative, Horton," he suggested, with veiled interest in his voice.

"Well, there really ain't so much to tell," began the man addressed; "I went there about eleven years or

so ago to homestead a quarter on the slope of a ridge called 'Stony Lonesome'—not in *your* valley, John," and they all laughed again, "but just over the crest of the ridge from it. They are not a bad lot—those hill people. On the contrary they've got fine qualities. After you live with them a bit and ketch onto their kinks, you find them a good sort. Well, the only neighbor I had anywhere on this slope I was tellin' you about was a peculiar cove by the name of 'Welchel Dale'—as handsome a fellow as you ever set eyes on—" Marshall leaned a little toward him as he listened. "By-the-way, John, he was son-in-law to that old ha'nt you are keeping house with right now."

The men who were watching Marshall's face suddenly thanked their stars that the responsibility of his perilous scheme did not rest on their shoulders. For some reason he got up and changed his seat to where he was a little apart from the others. His face was now in shadow, but Dearing's eyes followed him, and shifted from his shaded face to the narrator's, and back again, as the story advanced:

"Well, Dale didn't seem to have any kinfolks at all, but to be just drifting. He was hardly grown when he ran away with and married the daughter of that old 'Silas' John told us about the other day. It seems that the girl was spirited and disobedient, anyway, and her marriage broke the old camel's back, for he disowned her for good."

He cut another chew of tobacco, stretched his legs, and continued deliberately: "Dale built a cabin

on the quarter right next to the one I afterward homesteaded. When I went there his wife had been dead for some years, but he still lived alone except for the company of his child.

"He was a queer fellow, Dale was, the queerest I ever set eyes on. He's about the only man I ever met who wouldn't lie at some time under some circumstances; and nothing the others could offer would induce him to enter any wild-cat scheme with them. He simply kept his hands clean. Two of them from over in the valley, a fellow named Trav Williams and one they called Bud Davis, tried to get him to go into the moonshine business with them, but he refused. It made them mean mad, and they went off and set up in the business without him."

The torches were burning lower; it was impossible now for Dearing to see his friend's face.

"Well, about that time," continued Horton, "my shack caught fire and burned down. Dale kindly invited me over to stay with him, and I went; but I hadn't been there many days before I saw that there was goin' to be trouble. The revenue officers raided and destroyed the still of Davis and Williams and captured both men. Well, that night, Dale come home in a white rage—he had the devil's own temper—and told me that the neighbors were sayin' he had informed on the arrested men. Now, in point of fact, Dale and I both knew who the informer was—a miserable sneaking cur by the fantastic name of 'Shan Thaggin.' But it belonged to Dale's code of honor not to peach, and of course I wasn't lookin'

for trouble. After the trial—the wretches got off through a string of systematic neighborhood lies—Williams and Davis come home with the fell determination of gettin' even with poor Welchel. And they did. They fixed it up for one of the neighbors to ask an interview with me one night at his own house, and while I was away, a party of unknowns went to our cabin and carried Dale off to the woods. It was told me on the dead quiet that when Dale protested his innocence and let out that he knew who the real informer was, his persecuters set about makin' him tell on the other man. It is said that they strung him up several times to try to make him tell, but that never a syllable could they get from him. The last time they pulled him up, they kept him hangin' a little too long. It was up to them then to justify themselves to their neighbors, so word was spread around that Dale had confessed. That was justification enough. Well, if you'll believe me, that little kid of Welchel's slept through that visitation and on through the night undisturbed. Early next mornin' an old man who kept the district store near by come and took her to his house. But you needn't be bothered about an adverse claim to that place, Marshall"—turning directly to him—"that kid was adopted by a rich man in south Alabama and could buy and sell your little hill-top several times."

"What do you remember of the child?" Marshall asked from the now deep shadow.

The narrator, whose mind was taken up with Marshall's vital interest in the property he occupied,

was not prepared for this question, and had to scratch his head a moment and think.

"Why, I—I—don't know much. She was just a kitten, you know. She had wonderful eyes, though, I remember; and she'd arch her back at you quick as a flash if you trespassed on what she considered her rights. She was high-minded like her daddy, and a trifle high-handed, too, if I remember right. But what do you want to know about her for?"

"What was her name?"

"Mary—Mary—oh, yes, Mary Elizabeth."

Marshall got up without comment, stretched himself, and went out under the starlight. Fred Dearing slipped out of the group and followed him in time to see him strike his hands together—in time to hear him, as he thought, exclaim under his breath:

"God! What have I done!"

But when Dearing came up to him and asked him what the matter was, Marshall answered in a surprised tone:

"Why, nothing! What are you talking about?"

But Dearing laid his hand on his arm: "John," he said, earnestly, "give this thing up."

"I'll not do it."

"It's a bad scheme, I tell you."

"Just what do you mean?"

"I mean that it's grasping—it's unjust, inhuman, to those poor devils up there."

"Dearing!"

"Ah, cut that, John! You need somebody to tell you the truth!"

Marshall did not speak for some moments, but when he did it was to ask: "Do you think that a half-dozen little mangy corn patches and as many log cabins are worth the millions of dollars that they are now keeping out of this section by the simple fact of their being?"

But Dearing ignored the question. "How could you get hold of such a big tract under the existing law?" he asked.

"Bought up a number of military-bounty land warrants, and had them all located here," replied the other, growing calmer. He did not see the expression of Fred Dearing's face, so he continued, in a mollified tone: "If you'll remember, I bought out most of the real land-owners—all that would sell—years ago. There were only a half-dozen or so little farms left. Of these only one is actually the property of the present holder, and I think I see my way to an early deal there, though I am going to have to pay an outrageous price for the place. Now, if it will make you feel any better on my account, I'll tell you that I have always intended to take those of the ousted tribe that are at all worth while, and provide them with homes and with good employment in some of our industrial plants. I have made up my mind to give back to each one of them—to such as deserve it, I mean—the full equivalent of the property which he will lose by me; and if another little scheme of mine carries, I shouldn't wonder if they don't get a lot more out of me than that. So cheer up, old man, I haven't gone to the devil yet, eh?"

Dearing's shoulder proved rather stiffly unresponsive to the friendly little shake the speaker tried to give it, and the shaken asked, coolly:

"What about the ones who are not 'worth while,' who don't 'deserve'?"

"Look here, Dearing, you heard Horton's story. Well, that mar Williams and that Bud Davis that you heard him tell about—men who have cheated the penitentiary and the gallows, too, mind you—are the principal landholders in that class; and they and their ilk can go to hell! They've enjoyed the free use of property that isn't theirs quite long enough. There is a Davis, a brother of Horton's man, by the way, that's a *man*. I'm going to do something nice for him. I'm going to make him a handsome present."

If Marshall looked for enthusiastic comment on his beneficent plans, he was doomed to disappointment, for Dearing changed the subject with:

"Thought I'd ride over to your place and pay you that visit you've been insisting on having."

There was a distinct pause, and then Marshall said, hesitatingly:

"Well—you see—I'll tell you, old man, I really can't make you quite comfortable now. You can't get anything to eat up there but walnuts and chestnuts; and, besides, I have to be away a good deal. Suppose you make your visit to me down here at the camp. The boys will feed you high and make you have a good time, and I'll be with you every few days. I've an excellent little saddle-horse up there

that I'll send down to be yours while you are here. Old man, it sure will be good to have you," he added, as if to throw in the touch of enthusiasm which the first part of his reply most certainly lacked.

If Dearing noticed the lack of enthusiasm, or if he felt any surprise or pique at having been thus cordially invited to stay away from his friend's place of habitation, the other had no way of knowing it, for the night hid their faces, and Dearing's voice was even and cheery as he replied:

"All right, I'll put up with the boys, then; but you'll let me really see something of you, won't you? You can't be so very busy."

"Why, yes, I'll be with you the biggest part of the time, of course." Several of the others joined them at this juncture, and the two friends had no further opportunity for confidential talk that night.

When Dearing rolled out for breakfast the next morning, he was told that Marshall had left before sunrise on a freight-train going south, after having given sweeping orders that he, Dearing, be shown "the time of his life."

The patriarch, who had shared his tent with Marshall in order to allow Dearing one to himself, told Dearing at breakfast, in an aside, that Marshall had spent the greater part of the night pacing up and down before the tent door.

CHAPTER XIV

THE hour for dismissal of school had come that day, or, at least, so stated John Marshall's watch on being appealed to for about the twentieth time; and still its owner had not succeeded in obtaining an interview with the little teacher.

Twice had Marshall essayed to see her, and twice had he been repulsed: At two o'clock, when, tired and dusty from hours of hard riding, he had presented himself at the school-house door and sent in a message, the teacher was reported "too busy" to see him. At afternoon recess, when he had again asked the favor of only a few words with her, she wrote on a slip of paper which she sent out to him: "There is nothing more to be said between us."

And so the hour of four o'clock had come without his having gained an interview with the girl, but it found him still determined to see her. He was deliberately waylaying her now, just at the fork of the road where she was bound to pass on her homeward journey.

The long vigil before the patriarch's tent last night, the half-day of hard travel, and the hours of impatient disappointment that had followed had written themselves across the man's strong face, and the lines about his hard mouth told the added story that something had hurt him, and vitally.

He was afoot to-day, and he now walked up and down the wooded stretch of the big road near the fork in restless impatience—always hurriedly, always feverishly, always as if the act itself had in it something of desperation.

At length, at a crucial point in his thinking, he unconsciously transgressed the limit he had set for himself and swung round the bend in the road, bringing himself suddenly face to face with the object of his deep perturbation.

The girl all but screamed at the suddenness of his appearance, but she recovered quickly and with a flash of spirit, as Marshall stopped immediately in front of her, purposely blocking her way.

"I have always assured myself that by instinct you were a gentleman," she said.

"Well, to-day I'm only a man. I must speak to you—just a moment, please—there have been developments in this land question that you must hear. It is for your sake that I am forcing myself on you."

The girl had turned away from him as he began to speak, but now faced him again. "What is it?" she asked, with quick apprehension.

"Why—I—let's walk on while I tell you."

"What is it you have found out?" the girl asked, impatient to know the worst or the best of it.

"Last night," he began again, "I heard a man tell a story that involved you and me, and your interests and my interests. He had lived up here—had stayed at your father's house. He said—this man said—

that the man we have always called 'White-faced Silas' was—I really wouldn't tell you this if I didn't have to—was your grandfather."

"No!"

"Yes."

"He told you a falsehood!"

"No, he told me the truth. I have been to Mr. Logan this morning to verify his statements."

"It isn't true, I tell you! I won't have it true!" The girl turned on him as if to hold him personally responsible for the story that he was telling her: "What do you mean by coming to me with such a statement as that? Even if it were true, how could you?"

"I wouldn't hurt you for anything if I could help it, but don't you see how this complicates things for you and me?"

"I don't see anything except that I am— Oh, I knew that I came of poor and ignorant people, but I thought—I always thought that I could hold up my head!"

"Why, you can. Nobody in all this countryside has a better right to," and as they stopped, facing each other, he told her the story of her father, the man who had kept his hands clean of illicit business and died for what he considered a point of honor. He did not tell her how Welch Dale had died, and he purposely withheld the names of the men who were responsible for his death.

"And I am *his* child?" she said, and her proud lips quivered.

"Yes, you are *his* child. I recognized you in the description of him."

He had the satisfaction of seeing her troubled face clear, in a degree, of the poignant pain his disclosure had given her; and something intimately tender trembled for a moment on his lips, when the girl reminded him, coldly:

"You said there was something about this land matter that I ought to know."

The warm flush that had sprung to his face receded. "Why, don't you see what this brings about?" he asked, lamely.

"Does it bring anything about?"

"Yes, it's your property—I mean that it is property which you have the sentimental claim to—that I have taken possession of, and am living on now—it's——"

"It's *mine*? That place is *mine*? And you have at last decided to let me know that it is *my* titles which are good— No, no, I know better than that—I didn't mean that!"

He did not answer her but stood silent under her charges. It was the girl herself who refuted them. She came up to him, she put out her hand as if to lay it on his arm, but she looked into the eyes of the man and drew back. When she spoke again it was with an effort:

"I know that you would not do *me* an injustice; I have told myself over and over that you would, but I don't believe it now. Don't, don't be hurt with me." Her lips were threatening to tremble again, and the man surrendered, unconditionally.

"Oh, never mind about me. It is you who are to be considered. What on earth are we going to do about it?"

"Why, I don't have to tell you what I am going to do."

"What?"

"I am going to keep my property to save these others. I'm sorry that it has to hurt you." But even as she said it, a sickening doubt of him welled up in her heart.

"But that is beyond your power."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see yet that this property about here never did belong to the people? It's *government* land." The girl was visibly hardening again, and the desperation in the man's tone voiced his utter hopelessness of convincing her. "The situation in a nutshell is that your grandfather, more intelligent than his neighbors, 'entered' his land according to law; but, for some reason, failed to make final proof before his death. His heirs could, on the proper showing, have completed the entry and obtained the titles. You yourself might have done this if you had known, if I had known, that you were this man's heir."

"Why do you say 'might have' done it? Why can't I do it now?" The spirit of the hills was challenging.

"You can't do it for the reason that the property is absolutely mine."—Could this be the same Mary Elizabeth who five minutes ago was repentant for having wounded him?—But he made no sign as he

continued: "Finding this land registered as an 'abandoned' claim, I entered it. I have lived on it only a few months, but I paid the difference in cash. A week ago to-day I obtained the titles. I did not know until last night that you were the heir of the first claimant, and I came to you as soon as I heard it."

"What for?"

"What for? Do you ask me that?"

"I certainly do."

"To pay you for what you have lost through me."

"But the property was not my grandfather's, you say."

"No, the titles were in the government."

"Then you don't owe me anything."

"But you don't understand," the man protested.

"Yes, I do understand, perfectly. I understand that something which might have been mine, if I had known in time to secure it, is now yours because I did not know. And I understand that if I had secured this property, I could have saved these people's homes for them and defeated your big industrial scheme."

Did she really mean what her words implied? The man asked himself the question, but in vain. When he spoke again he was still debating her deeper meaning:

"But you do not understand that the business world grants a certain money value to claims like yours. It will be really worth it to me to buy what is called a 'quitclaim' from you. You are just and

fair to others; try, for once, to be just to me. Now this property is not yours, but you stand deprived by me of a certain claim to it which you might have re-established. You might also have sold the claim, unknowingly, to some other unknowing party, and thus have realized on it."

"You want to pay me for what doesn't belong to me?—I'm trying to follow you, but you'll forgive me if I find it hard."

"If you will just take my word for it, I want to pay you for something that is worth money to me."

"What?"

"Your willingness to surrender all claim to the property, your agreement not to make trouble about it, your 'good-will,' as it is called in law."

"But I am not willing to give up these claims that you say I don't possess if through them I can make trouble for you, and you haven't the money to buy from me my 'good-will'!"

Marshall despaired of getting her to comprehend the legal significance of the term which she thus seized upon and misinterpreted, but he decided to make one more appeal to her, and he urged it very sincerely:

"Now let me tell you something," he insisted. "Put aside your prejudices for a moment, if you possibly can, and consider this side of the proposition: If you persist in your opposition to me, you are going to stir up trouble here, trouble which can end in but one thing—injury to the people you are trying to help. If you acquiesce in this arrangement with me,

and you should, you will furnish an example to these people, and help them to make way cheerfully for a prosperity which they and their children will have the chance to share."

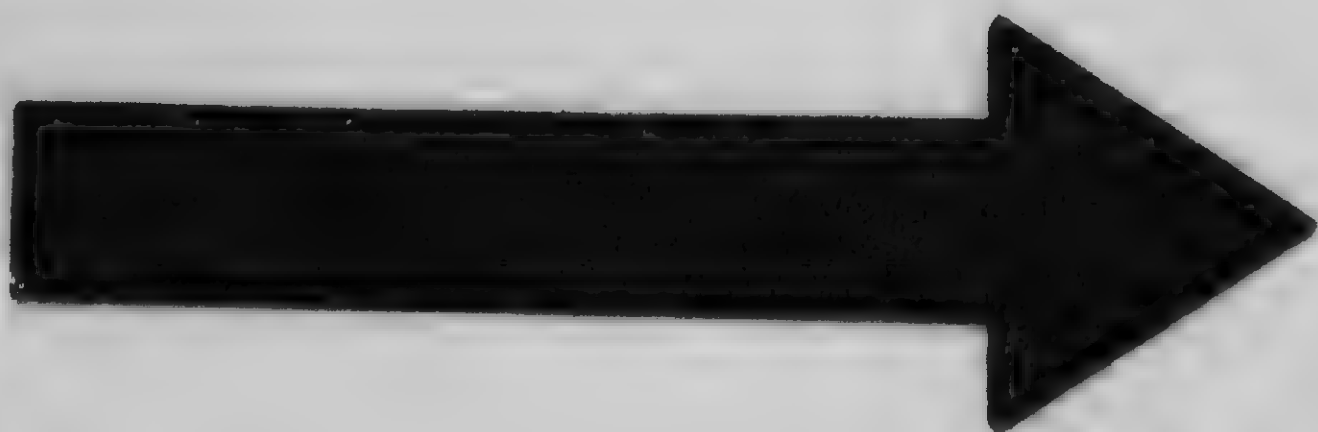
All at once the girl remembered a scene beside an isolated grave when the twilight had shown her things which the garish daylight of her every-day life had but served to conceal.

"Don't," she protested to Marshall, passionately. "*Don't!*"

"But, good God, I can't rob a woman!" he burst out, with inadvertent desperation.

"There's a woman in every home that you are planning to destroy," she replied. "It's curious, isn't it, that men who will not hesitate to do injustice to a number of women collectively, will indignantly reject the idea of being unjust to a woman. What's the psychology of it?"

"The psychology of my own particular part in it is that I am a fool!" he exclaimed, with a sudden, desperate welling up of the heart within him. "Oh, don't be afraid, I'm not going to make love to you again! You are unjust to me, you know you are. You who prate of justice for everybody else, set your face steadily against me, right or wrong. You know perfectly well that there could be to me no bitterness comparable to doing you an injury and leaving it unrepaired, yet you deliberately put me in this position. You know that I did not dream the property was yours, and that I would have died rather than take it knowingly. Yet now you refuse to let me right the wrong I have done you!"



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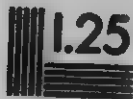
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"But you said the property was not mine. How could you rob me of what was not mine?" she interrupted.

"Why, if you had known it in time, you might have contested my claim. You had, of course, only one chance in many of winning in open contest against me, but still that one chance was worth something, and I have robbed you of that. It is nothing but humanly right, and fair and just to me, that you should let me make adequate restitution."

"That is so like you."

"What is?"

"That 'adequate restitution.'"

"Will you tell me what you mean?"

"Why, there are men who would have thought of just plain 'restitution.'"

Mary Elizabeth was too angry now to see or care for the hurt which her words inflicted, but she was interested in seeing the man dive for something in his innermost pocket with a savagery seemingly totally unnecessary.

"What is it?" she asked, as a formidable-looking paper was thrust into her hand.

"Just plain 'restitution.'"

"Please tell me what it is about."

"It is a deed from myself to yourself of the property I am living on now. It makes that property yours beyond anybody's question. It was not yours at first, but it is now. I entered the land fairly, and subscribed to all the requirements made by the government. I got full titles to it a week ago. Last night I found out that it was your grandfather

who had all but completed claim before dying. I hoped that you would let me pay you for the place for reasons that we need not discuss now, but I was so afraid that you would not, and was so certain that I was not going to do you even a seeming injustice, that I went to Simkinsville this morning, and formally deeded the property to you. As long as you hold that paper, neither I nor any other man can disturb you in possession of the place."

"And you were probably certain, also, that I would decline to accept this from you!"

Marshall looked her through and through, then turned on his heel and left her standing with the deed to the haunted house in her outstretched hand. Scarcely had he taken the first half-dozen hurried steps, however, when the girl began tearing the formidable paper into bits.

At the first sound of the tearing, Marshall turned quickly and sprang to her side to catch her hands and stop her, but he was too late. The white fragments were already fluttering to earth as he grasped her wrists.

"You—you can't *give* me anything!" she stormed, snatching away from his detaining grasp. "I know you now. You've been trying to buy me from the first because you thought I had influence here, and would help you cheat these people. That's what it is! And I was weak enough to think that your beautiful attentions were what they seemed, and I trusted you when you betrayed my woman's heart and told me——"

"Don't say *that* to me, *don't!*"

But the girl's almost insane temper was now at white heat. "Oh, but I know you, I tell you! And I even see through this crowning act of yours—you knew that I wouldn't take it, but you thought I wouldn't understand, that I would be grateful to you—so grateful that I wouldn't turn on you at a crisis and tell what I know. *You* couldn't understand what it means to be bound by a sense of honor!"

This time when he turned and left her he did not come back.

CHAPTER XV

"SISTER DAVIS, what on earth is the matter with Ma'y 'Lizbeth Dale?"

It was Sunday afternoon at the Thaggin home, and a half-dozen neighborhood gossips were gathered together in the "big room" to discuss a momentous happening.

Outside, on the porch, the men were taking the keen fall air rather than brave the company of the "sisteren" inside. It might have been the result of the tradition-long division of the sheep from the goats in their primitive little church that thus the two sexes herded in separate groups all Sunday long, or it might have been that the weekly shave and bath took the hardihood out of these primitive lords of creation much as a periodical plucking renders timid and ashamed the geese that are plucked. Certain it was that the lords in question hung around on the edges of this Sunday afternoon conclave, and echoed only weakly the gossip of the main group.

"What is the matter with Ma'y 'Lizbeth Dale?" The speaker was hurriedly untying her bonnet strings, and the suppressed excitement in her question voiced the mood of the assemblage, the members of which were in the first plunge of deep debate.

"Dilsey Sellers, when you tell me what the matter is with the whole rotten tribe she come from, I'll set

you straight 'bout Ma'y 'Lizbeth herself." Aunt Millie Davis was rarely known to answer civilly, even when a question was especially pleasing to her.

A hacking cough from the depths of a homespun-covered barrel chair was followed by the eager but quavering question: "What's she been up to now?"

"Hush, ma! Why *can't* you 'tend to your own business?" the younger Mrs. Thaggin hastened to put in, but the first speaker was not so easily silenced.

"Why, grandma, ef you'll b'lieve me, Ma'y 'Lizbeth 'fused to come up to the communion table this mornin', an' when Brother Sykes went over to her an' exhorted her to come, she shrunk away from him, horrified-like, an' her eyes burnt like live coals!"

"Grandma, you ain't never seen the beat o' that look she give Brother Sykes," interpolated another.

"Hit's somethin' on her conscience," exclaimed the old lady; "she ain't been givin' some people what rightfully b'longs to 'em."

"Hit's somethin' on her conscience, all right," insinuated the first speaker. "Did you see him thar—that strange man? An' for the first time in his life? An' did you see the way he watched her? The wretch never shet his eyes in prayer a single time for lookin' at her; an' when Brother Sykes tried to make her see the error of her ways, *he* got up an' flung out o' meetin'."

"She looked like a ha'nt herself," put in another. "I shouldn't wonder ef she hasn't been more'n a handful for you, Sister Davis. Beck Login is astin' a good deal of you."

"Ef you hadn't done got sanctification, you wouldn't stand hit a minute, would you, Mis' Davis?" asked still another before the interrogated could gather her wrath together. The last question caused the wind of Aunt Millie's mood to whip around to another quarter, and she folded her hands resignedly, and lifted her eyes to the ceiling. A look of disappointment crossed Dilsey Sellers's face. She was anxious to hear Aunt Millie out while yet her first mood was upon her, but the untimely reference to that lady's state of sanctification threatened to spoil it all.

"I kin bear anything the Lord sends, Viney," replied the old woman to the latest questioner, and a murmur of unctuous approval went up from the others which threatened to take all the snap out of the situation.

"Yes, if the *Lord* sends hit"—Dilsey was not to be defeated—"but thar's other powers at work. Now I was jest a-thinkin' how your Babe sot thar this mornin' a-starin' across to the women's side o' the church, a-watchin' ever' bat of Ma'y 'Lizbeth's eyelids. I've seen the day, Sister Davis, when your boys was ra-al scornful-like to women, an' when they was that mannerly an' shamefaceded they wouldn't so much as glance over to whar the women set. An' I couldn't help rememberin' Sallie an' all the trouble you had along o' her an' Bud, an' a-wonderin'——"

A very genuine sigh went up from the old woman. "You're speakin' the truth, now, Dilsey," she said,

with sincere concern. "Hit looks like I'm a-goin' to have trouble now for sure."

"That's jes what we all sensed, Mis' Davis; Babe sho is took with that gal. Is she brazen enough to be a-settin' up to him right thar under your nose?"

"She's brazen enough for anything," snapped the old woman; "but that ain't the worst of it"—the group leaned forward as a unit in breathless interest, and the speaker continued—"that ain't the worst of it. Bud sees th'ough her as clear as day, an' he ain't got no patience with her a tall. He's goin' to tell her what he thinks of her yet, in spite of all I kin do; an' when he does, that fool Babe is goin' to up an' do somethin' he hadn't ought to."

"Now ain't that awful!"

"La, Mis' Davis! Babe ain't got 'nough suption in him to make trouble, is he? When we was growin' up we used to say he didn't have right good wit"—Dilsey Sellers was getting even.

"Babe's got very good wit, considerin'!"—Grandma Thaggin caught her daughter-in-law's eye and stopped, while Aunt Millie flashed back: "Babe's got more sense than many that talks about him."

"An' they do say that them quiet, stupid-like folks is awful when you git 'em riled." Viney was doing her groping best to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Wa-al," said the old mother, with a glow of pride, "as mean as he looks, I'd ruther git Bud ra-al deep stirred up any day than Babe. Y'all don't know Babe like I do!"

"Mis' Davis," the younger Mrs. Thaggin had held

her peace up to this point, "I wouldn't be pestered 'bout Babe an' the teacher, ef I was you. The likes of her ain't apt to be settlin' down here for life. She ain't beholden to none of us, you know, for the man what raised her must a-had a lot o' money." This was a new and unwelcome note in the discussion, but Mrs. Davis hastened to reverse its effect.

"Melissa Thaggin, don't you know that man shifted her off on us 'cause he had done got tired of her? An' don't you know, furthermore, that he laid down and died not long ago 'thout ever leavin' her a cent?"

"Why, no, Mis' Davis, nobody ain't told me that."

"Wa-al, he did."

"Still," the younger Mrs. Thaggin insisted, "Ma'y 'Lizabeth ain't to say 'shifted off' on nobody. She's makin' her own good money teachin', an' she's payin' her boa'd an' washin'."

"Wa-al, I ain't heerd tell of their givin' her the school for life, Melissa, an' I have heerd tell of Mr. Sykes's bein' awful displeased with her way of teachin' it. Mr. Williams told my Bud no longer than yestiddy that there ought to be a man teacher here to whup the boys. You know whether Trav Williams's got influence here or not." Melissa Thaggin was dumb with something more than surprise, but the others voiced their approval of Trav Williams's sentiments in monosyllabic exclamations. Then one of them reverted to the original subject:

"How did she take the news of that man's dyin' an' not leavin' her all that money she thought she was a-goin' to git?"

"Took hit like anybody else with her smartness would a-took hit. She knowed she was dependent on us after that, an' she jes nachully set to work makin' fair weather with us all right away. She told Babe that she was goin' to *do her duty by us*, an' he swallowed the bait, hook an' all!" The old woman cackled derisively as she continued: "An' the fun of hit is, she's even been a-makin' up to me. Oh, she was powerful high an' mighty at fust, but this last week she's been too good for anything. She actually he'ps with the dishes! I sont her to the well, yes-tiddy, but that fool, Babe, took the bucket away from her an' drawed the water hisself."

"Wa-al, I'd a-took Babe Davis to be more manlier than to be doin' women's work!"

"That's the trouble with you, Dilsey, ef you'd a-knowed anything about men, you'd a-had one o' your own by this time. Now you kin take hit from me that any man that's lovin' a woman will draw water for her tell he gits her."

There was an awkward silence for a minute, for Dilsey Sellers's unmarried state was considered a most delicate and deplorable circumstance. It was the younger Mrs. Thaggin who kindly turned the conversation:

"Surster is ra-al timid-like, ain't she, Mis' Davis? Come out from behind the bed, honey, an' let me see you in your shoes an' stockin's." But the scared-looking child only crowded up closer in her place of refuge and put her finger in her mouth.

"That's Sallie in her," declared the grandmother. "I never could learn her no manners. Jes let her

alone, Melissa, she'll perk up after while. She's kinder mortified 'cause she's clean." All untaught. Aunt Millie had grasped for herself the psychology of the situation. On Saturday nights it was her practice to "wash" Sister down to the substratum of original sin. Mary Elizabeth spoke of the process as "bathing," but in spirit and in truth the weekly rite that Aunt Millie performed on Sister was exactly what the old woman called it, and the ordeal always took something out of the child, temperamentally, that it took her nearly a whole week to regain.

But Dilsey Sellers was opposed to allowing a child to monopolize the attention of grown people; besides, she was not yet ready to give up their most interesting topic of gossip.

"What about that strange man over to Silas's place? He's been a-keepin' sich steady comp'ny with Ma'y 'Lizabeth he don't seem to be leavin' her much chance to make up to Babe."

"Who?—him?" Aunt Millie sniffed like a war-horse. "Lord, didn't you know he has done throwed Ma'y 'Lizabeth over?" The reply came like a bomb-shell, and a half-dozen exclamations followed in rapid succession.

"Now ain't that like a man!" Dilsey was left saying. "Took up all her time tell he got tired of her, an' then throwed her away. But hit serves her right, the shameless piece! Mis' Thaggin, hit sho were a blessin' you didn't send Sue to school to her like she come an' begged you to. With little childern hit

don't so much matter, but Sue's ketchin' on to things, an' that picce might a-been the ruination of her."

"Who are you old sisters scandalizin' now?" Uncle Beck Logan had momentarily detached himself from his masculine companions, and poked his head in the window.

"People ain't never scandalized tell they scandalize themselves," snapped the last speaker; but she didn't explain.

Aunt Millie was to the front in an instant.

"I was jes tellin' 'em, Beck Login, how that pet o' yourn has done been give the go-by by that stranger what y'all can't find out nothin' 'bout. She ain't been loafin' around the woods with him for a week, an' she has grieved herself plum sick on account of hit."

The habitually kind smile died out of the man's face. "Millie," he said grimly, looking straight into the old woman's eyes, "ef sanctification were ketchin', I'd quarantine the neighborhood ag'inst you."

"We women ain't sayin' no more'n you men air thinkin'," ventured a sharp-nosed sister, who had been silent till now. "Trav Williams has already done told my Joshua what *he* thinks 'bout her."

"Trav Williams got crost-ways with Ma'y 'Lizbeth at the start, an' he jes won't see things right."

"What did she 'fuse communion for, can you tell us that?" It was another hitherto silent voice that challenged.

"Mebbe she wasn't in love an' charity with her neighbors like the rest of you, an' she was 'feard

she'd git a mouthful o' damnation." For fully a minute the horrified listeners looked for the lightning to strike Uncle Beck dead in his tracks for his sacrilege, but after sixty seconds of clear skies they returned to the charge:

"Wa-al, whar's Ma'y 'Lizbeth now? Hit's easy to see she ain't here bein' sociable with her neighbors," Dilsey Sellers asked.

"Wa-al, Dilsey," replied the old man with his characteristic slowness, "Ma'y 'Lizbeth weren't raised up here, an' she ain't learned that hit's part of her Sunday duty to help scandalize other women; so jest at present, she is readin' to your blind sister what you left all by herself. I stopped an' passed the time o' the day with 'em when I come by." Uncle Beck had stepped through the window, and now stood with his gaunt figure drawn up to its full height. He was looking straight at Dilsey.

"A readin' book, I reckon!" sneered the other, in a desperate attempt to recover.

"No, the Bible, Dilsey."

"Uncle Beck," the ample hostess put in uneasily, "you 'lowed you was goin' to tell me what to do for that shoat what's done took sick. Can't you step out to the lot an' take a look at him?" The old man hesitated. He seemed not to have finished what he had to say, but he ended by following the younger Mrs. Thaggin to the back lot.

"Uncle Beck," said the woman, resting her arms on the fence of the hog-pen, but giving never a glance at the shoat inside, "Uncle Beck, I'm pestered 'bout Ma'y 'Lizbeth."

"So am I, Melissa."

"What you reckon she done that way this mornin' for?"

"Tut—tut! Nothin' serious! Like as not she was mad at somethin' Millie Davis had said to her. She's that sot in her principles that ef she'd got her temper up at anybody she wouldn't a-thought hit right to commune."

"Uncle Beck, you always was consolin'."

"Wa-al, thar ain't much consolation to be got out of the siterwation now, Melissa. Hit's mighty serious that them women's tongues have got to waggin' about her. Can't you do somethin' for her?"

"I'll make ma keep her mouth shet. An'—an'—yes, I'll send Sue to school. That'll show people where I stand. Uncle Beck—Ma'y 'Lizbeth is a good girl, ain't she?"

"As good as they make 'em."

"Then I'll stand by her."

"You always was a good gal yourself, Melissa. Say, why can't you take Ma'y 'Lizbeth to boa'd? I couldn't he'p overhearin' what Mis' Davis said 'bout Bud an' Babe bein' sot ag'inst each other about her. Hit ain't right to bring trouble between them two."

"La! Uncle Beck, I'd do it ef hit were jes only me; but Shan he wouldn't 'low it. He's done been sot ag'inst her by ma, an' he won't b'lieve nothin' good of her. An' you know how hectorin' men air what ain't right smart in their minds."

"Wa-al, wa-al, we'll have to do some other way," he acquiesced, kindly.

"Uncle Beck, Mis' Davis said jes now that the

trustees was talkin' 'bout turnin' Ma'y 'Lizbeth outen the school!"

The old man removed his spectacles, polished them hard on his ostentatious Sunday handkerchief, and, readjusting them on his nose, looked at the woman with grave concern.

"I'm one of the trustees, myself, Melissa, an' I ain't heerd of no dissatisfaction except from Mr. Sykes."

"Aunt Millie seemed to think that Mr. Williams was at the bottom of hit."

"Wa-al, wa-al, Trav can't for the life of him forgive Ma'y 'Lizbeth for bein' Welchel Dale's child," he said, by way of reminiscence, "but I'll be at any meetin' they hold, an' I promise you I'll make things interestin' ef they pester her. I'm afeard I'm goin' to have to read 'em the riot act ag'in, Melissa. Lord, Lord, but a man oughtn't to have to tell his neighbors the truth more'n onct in a lifetime!"

"Ain't that so, Uncle Beck!"

"Melissa, what's this 'bout Ma'y 'Lizbeth an' that man Marshall?"

"I don't know nothin' but what you heerd Aunt Millie say 'bout his th'owin' off on her. But all the neighbors has been talkin' 'bout how much she's been a-goin' with him. My Tony says he keeps a horse an' saddle for her, an' is always a-sendin' her candy an' things what he has to have sont to him from away from here. Of course, Uncle Beck, I b'lieve hit's all right so far as Ma'y 'Lizbeth is concerned, but I wouldn't trust that overbearin'

stranger no further than I could sling a wild-cat by the tail." "An' me neither, Melissa."

"Wa-al, anyhow, hit seems to be broke off now, an' I'm glad of it."

"Yes, yes, that's good. Now ef you'll only sorter take her under your wing all this talk will die down."

"Yes, but I'm 'feard I won't be here long enough to see to it."

"Melissa Thaggin, air you a-losin' your mind?"

"No-o-o—Uncle Beck, don't tell a soul, hear?—but Shan is 'bout to sell our place an' move us all outen the valley."

"The land o' Goshen!"—then suddenly—"Who to, Melissa?"

"That very same man. He's done offered Shan a sight o' money, an' ef ma don't give trouble, we'll close the trade. Shan's done told ma she's got to put her cross mark to the papers, but she ain't quite come round yit. Shee-e-e—" putting her finger to her lips, "here come Shan an' the others. Don't say a word 'bout what I told you, hear? Mr. Marshall made us promise to keep the trade on the quiet tell we pick up an' leave."

"I'll keep quiet, Melissa, but ef you know when you air well off, you won't sign no papers to that man tell he shows his hand. Somehow, I mistrust all this secrecy."

CHAPTER XVI

THAT there was something in the wind that night besides the wail of the dying forest and the sharp, cold needles of rain, even the youngest Thaggin could feel by the intuition of fear that was his; so it was small wonder that he stayed awake till the unearthly hour of seven o'clock, and increased the general hubbub by the size of his year-old voice.

Something was going to happen, that was plain. The house had had an additional scrubbing and tidying-up, and Grandma and the mother had arrayed themselves in their best linsey dresses. The lord and master of the house had been importuned to don his Sunday collar, but had flatly refused—there was a grain of comfort in that. From Sue to the baby the children were keyed up to the highest pitch of excitement.

But all things come to an end sooner or later; and by half-past seven o'clock the last young Thaggin had been tucked away safe, the trundle-beds that had been rolled out from under the beds of state, and the boarded-up bunks against the side of one of the shed rooms at the back, being full to the edges.

Quiet now reigned in the family circle. The grandmother, who was used to being tucked away with the children at sundown, plainly nodded in her big chair in spite of the strenuous efforts that had

been made to keep her "heartened up" against a momentous happening. The wife of Shan Thaggin plied her knitting-needles in silence, but there were furrows of thinking on her erstwhile placid brow. Shan sat with his legs stretched out at length, toasting the bottoms of his feet by the fire and vainly attempting to warm the half-frozen heels of them.

But the comfort and quietude on the inside only threw into sharp contrast the tempestuous bluster without. November was howling across the stripped fields, and fighting her way, with wind and rain, through the opposing ranks of the forest. It was black dark.

The old woman in the homespun-covered chair nodded lower and lower, and after a while a distinct snore was heard. The husband and wife looked at each other across the little pine table and the fitful firelight disclosed a question in the eyes of each.

"Will he come?" it asked.

"Listen at that rain, Shan," the wife said in half-answer.

"The likes o' him don't mind rain," the man replied. "Ef he wants to trade as bad as I think he does, a shower o' bull-frogs couldn't keep him away."

"What you goin' to tell him?"

"I'm a-goin' to ast him more money."

"Lord, Shan, he's payin' you twict as much as you have been a-astin' for hit, already!"

"Yes, but ef he comes out a night like this, hit'll be a sign he wants the place bad enough to pay two hunderd more. An' you jes keep your mouth out

while he's here. I don't want any too much jaw about hit, 'cause I want to make him think we're keerness 'bout tradin'. Jes treat hit all offhand-like, you hear?"

"Of course," said the wife, sympathetically. "An' do you think you kin manage *her*?" with an inclination of the head toward the nodding figure.

"He's a-goin' to try *his* hand on her to-night. Ef we can't make her sign, you've got to!"

"Now look a-here, Shan, I ain't a-goin' to hector ma no more'n I have to. I've had a hard 'nough time makin' her keep her mouth shet about this to the neighbors, an' when hit comes to makin' her put her cross mark to them papers, you've got to manage hit yourself—you an' that devil-knows-who! Besides——"

"Besides what?" sharply. But the woman kept her peace.

"Besides what, I say?" the man snarled at her across the table.

"Besides," she replied slowly, "I ain't right easy in my mind 'bout this piece o' business, nohow. I ain't as much took up with the idea of the trade as I was at first, an' I don't see no use in a-draggin' ma all the way to town an' layin' her liable to ketchin' her death o' cold when she could jest as well sign them papers here."

"Ain't I done told you that we got to have a witness to the signin', an' we don't want to let nobody in these parts onto the trade?" the husband growled.

"Why can't you bring a witness from town?" the woman asked.

"B'cause he might talk too much to the folks he met. I told you what Mr. Marshall said about hit."

"Wa-al, I don't 'prove of no such secrecy. I tell you, Shan, hit don't look nachul for him to be so skeered for his neighbors to know he's jes makin' a simple trade. There's somethin' back of hit, an' I don't like hit."

"Now you jes let me ketch you tryin' to back down, will you?"

"No, I won't," she snapped back, all unafraid of the threatening, evil look he shot at her; "I won't b'cause my word's done give. But don't you think hit's b'cause I'm afeard of you, you little pusillanimous— There goes Sue in a nightmare ag'in!" The mother rose quickly and crossed the room to one of the big feather-puffed beds, where the rosy-cheeked Sue lay whimpering in her sleep.

"Hit's jes the kind o' night that some folks thinks witches rides in." The husband and father had slouched across the room, and stood for a moment contemplating his eldest-born.

"Witches—the cat's foot! Hit's them green cabbage stalks she's been a-eatin'. I 'low I'll slap her face 'bout 'em in the mornin'." But the touch was not ungentle with which she shifted the position of the dreaming girl. The mother's hands lingered a little on the girl's forehead, brushing back the brown tendrils that fell over it. The father waited a moment, too.

"Shan," said the mother, "I'm a-goin' to send Sue to school!" There was sharp challenge in the manner of her announcement.

For some reason the man did not accept the challenge. He seemed to be trying to avert a contest. "Wa-al," he answered, evasively, "I ain't a-sayin' what I think 'bout Sue an' schoolin', b'cause my mind is already done full of a bigger plan for her."

"What plan?" the mother demanded, coming straight to the point.

"Well, me an' Trav Williams was a-talkin' to-day 'bout how well growed up she was, an' Trav told me he had a-sort a-been takin' notice of her hisself."

They were moving toward the fire, and the mother suddenly sat down in a convenient chair, overcome by the bigness of her husband's news.

"Now did anybody ever hear the beat o' that!" she exclaimed, but delighted pride wrote itself across her every feature.

"He's got more land than anybody in the valley," said her husband, warming up to his subject, "an' the storehouse is his'n, an'——"

"An' he's got a bran' new buggy!" the wife put in.

"Yes'n he's got money in hidin', too."

The mother looked across the room to where Sue's apple cheeks reddened in the sudden flare of the fire-light, and a shade crossed her own glowing face. "Shan," she said, doubtfully, "Sue's jes turned fourteen, an' Mr. Williams is older'n you by twelve year."

"Dad bust his age! What's that got to do with hit? Ain't I done told you he can buy an' sell the last one of us?"

"Yes," said the mother, lingeringly, "but——"

"But what? But what?"

"Oh, nothin'—but—I was jes wishin' he wa'n't so servigrous. Ef he were jes a little more peaceable-like, an' kind, you know——"

"I know you ain't got a grain o' sense!"

"I got a long sight more sense'n you have! Of course I ain't a-goin' to stand in the child's way, but I jes couldn't help ruminatin' in my mind 'bout Lizzie. Lord, Lord, an' jes to think! Hit ain't been but seven weeks, come a-Monday, sence I holp wash Lizzie Williams and lay her out——"

"Wa-al, a woman's as dead in seven weeks as she'll ever be, ain't she?"

"Oh, she's dead enough all right. I was jes a-thinkin' how glad she was to die. Listen! Was that somebody comin'?" The two listened intently, but nothing was heard except the howling of the November winds and the swish of the driving rain. When the woman took up the thread of conversation again, she had dropped back into her pleased, contemplative mood—verily, Lizzie Williams was as dead as ever a woman gets to be!

"Has Mr. Williams been a-talkin' to Sue yet?" she queried.

"Yes, comin' home from meetin' this mornin'. That's what he fetched her in his buggy for."

"An' did Sue make up to him? Did he say?" She was all excited interest.

The husband nodded an impressive affirmative. The mere noddin' of one's head isn't lying. Besides, Shan was resolved to compel the fearful and

cringing Sue to make good his words so shortly that the thing was as good as done, already. The wife bubbled over:

"Now ain't that nice! An' did Mr. Williams say when he thought they'd better stand up before the preacher?"

"Sunday after next." Shan's new-found dignity came very near impressing his wife, and that is saying a good deal for it.

"Wa-al, that settles her goin' to school. I'd a-liked to 'commode Uncle Beck an' Ma'y 'Lizbeth, but of course hit's outen the question now."

"An' what's Ma'y 'Lizbeth got to do with hit, I'd like to know?" The man was suspicious instantly.

"Oh, nothin'," said the wife, retreating, "but she's been so good to Tony an' the others, I'd a-liked to let her try her hand on Sue."

"Good to Tony! She'd a sight better lay the hickory on him, like Mr. Sykes says. He's been thar to see her teachin', an' he p'intedly told us all at meetin' to-day that Ma'y 'Lizbeth was jes nachully pamperin' them childern to death."

"Yes, I know, Shan, but you 'member we tried Tony with that man teacher last summer, an' he had the boy shiverin' an' cringin' like a houn' dog. Somehow, I can't think that's right."

"Wa-al, hit ain't your business to do the thinkin'. Hit's your doin's, too, that she hired Tony out to hang round that place o' Silas's what Christian people ought to keep off'n." A sudden gust of wind

whipped around the corner of the room with a wild shriek, and the two started and looked at each other; after a momentary hush, however, the wife found her tongue.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth never hired Tony to nobody," she declared. "She jes said she'd like for him to he'p Mr. Marshall, an' Mr. Marshall told Tony what she said, an' Tony come to me 'bout hit."

"An' you hired him."

"Wa-al, ef I did, you git the money for hit, an' you make the man pay more'n he's wuth, too!"

"You can't deny he spends a lot o' time at that thar place."

"Shan, nothin' ain't goin' to happen to Tony along o' that place."—Was it the wind this time?—

"He never goes in sight of hit unless Mr. Marshall is right thar with him. Mr. Marshall hisself told me hit were like nussin' a sick baby to look after Tony, he was that skeered."

"What I want to know is, what business is Ma'y 'Lizabeth got a-wantin' to git he'p for that man?"

There was a fine disgust mingled with a glimpse of something higher in the look which the woman gave him: "Lord, but hit's hard to have to be a woman when a man won't be a man!" was her answer to him, but it passed over his head.

"Ain't nobody ever told Ma'y 'Lizabeth 'bout that place yit?" he asked significantly.

"No, but you kin b'lieve they will, they are that sot agin her."

"Ain't it queerlike an' creepy that she's gone an'

got mixed up with hit?"—Some placeless thing shrieked again.

"How 'mixed up with hit'?" the wife demanded, but her face had blanched.

"I seen what I seen."

"No you never, neither! I was on that waggin with you, an' I never seen her comin' outen the door with him. Besides that, we was way down the fust bend o' the road an' you couldn't a-seen that fur! An' let me tell you somethin'." she continued, "you've got to git that off'n ma's mind. You had no business a-tellin' her sich a tale an' takin' up all o' my time a-keepin' her mouth shet—Sh-h-h!"

The beat of a horse's hoofs resounded outside, and a man's "Hello" startled both to their feet. The unusual sounds, the late hour, and the wild night, blending with the eeriness of their conversation, wrought into the moment a thrill of real terror. The man pressed back against the mantel-shelf. It was the woman who summoned courage to unbolt the door and admit what the fates had sent.

With the water streaming from his mackintosh in rivulets and red mud bespattering his great boots, the stranger-tenant of the haunted house came in out of the darkness to the glowing warmth of the log fire inside. There were pleasant and courteous greetings as the visitor divested himself of his raincoat and stamped the red mud from his boots at the hospitable threshold. The noise and stir roused the old crone by the fireside, and caused the apple-red cheeks

of the momentarily awakened Sue to retire modestly under the bed-quilt.

After having acquitted himself creditably in the rite of the all-around handshake, a ceremony which has with the hill people the solemnity of a covenant, the stranger deliberately drew up a chair beside Grandma Thaggin, and asked after her cough with a deepness of concern that flattered the old crone into almost instant capitulation. Grandma told him literally *all* about it, for when her daughter-in-law would have interfered, Marshall signalled to her to let the old woman talk; so, for once since her son's marriage, grandma was granted the right of unlimited self-expression. Since this visit of the stranger's was primarily for the purpose of placating the old lady, the younger woman was fain to give way, though with deep misgivings. However, she seized the first opportunity which offered itself after her mother-in-law had diagnosed her malady to the minutest detail, to remark:

"You don't let a bad night stop you from important business, do you, Mr. Marshall?"

"Well, the business didn't so much matter," he replied in an off-hand way, "but I was afraid I'd keep you folks up, looking for me, and I knew that your mother here ought not to have her rest broken." The old woman's eyes sparkled with delight. For the first time in her life-drama she was centre of the stage.

"Now that were ra-al considerate of you, hit sho were," she wheezed. "Shan 'lowed as how you

wouldn't come out in this pesky weather lessen you wanted to trade mighty bad." Her daughter-in-law's mute lips signalled "hush" to her from behind the visitor's back.

"No-o-o," said the stranger, deliberately. "The fact is, I have been hesitating myself lately. Mr. Logan has offered me his farm, and since taking a look at it, I am very much in the notion of buying it. Logan has kept up his property so well."

"Thar ain't no better-kept farm in the country than this one right here," declared the woman who ten minutes before had thought she was not anxious to trade, and she and her husband exchanged glances. Shan got up and then sat down again.

"Oh, well, I as good as told you the other morning that I would trade if we could get the titles fired all right, so I suppose I'll have to live up to my promise."

"Did you find out what you wanted about them papers? Was they all right?" Shan asked, eagerly catching at renewed hope.

"Yes—that is to say—I guess we can fix it. Do you still want to trade?" The stranger put the query as if the whole affair were a matter of the smallest personal concern to himself.

In answer to a desperate signal from his wife, Thaggin replied in the affirmative.

"Ain't I a-goin' to git nothin' for puttin' my cross mark to them papers?" It was the old woman who was eagerly questioning.

"Why," began Marshall, "half the proceeds—"

this time the signalled "hush" was directed at him, and silenced him. A moment afterward, however, he said, in reply to the repeated question: "Well, it is a shame to ask you to take that long ride to town without getting something nice for it. Now what would you like to have?"

"Money!"

"Oh," and he laughed. "Well, 'bein's it's you,' grandma, I'll give you two hundred silver dollars if you'll sign those papers and not say a word about it to anybody." And he added in an aside to Shan: "I'll let *you* pay that, Thaggin, if you really want to trade. I'm going to take it on myself to see that she gets enough out of this for her personal comfort. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!" Then he turned to the old woman again: "And if you are right good and will get ready for the trip the first fair day, we'll lay in a big stock of cough medicine while we are in town—as a present from me, you understand."

"Now don't that look like Providence!" exclaimed the old lady. "My medicine's done plum out, an' that triffin' Ma'y 'Lizbeth 'tended like she couldn't buy me no more tell she drawed her next pay."

"Maybe she couldn't." It was the stranger who spoke, but his voice had changed slightly. The younger Mrs. Thaggin wondered if it were a trick of the firelight that gave his cold eyes a momentary hurt look.

"Mebbe she lied 'bout it, goin' an' comin'," flashed the old woman. "She told me the fust time

I sot eyes on her that hit was already done paid for!"

"Mrs. Thaggin," said the stranger, and this time there was no note of placating in his stern voice, "I know for a certainty that Miss Dale's guardian did not supply her with any money at all, and that what she spends on you or on anybody else is what she makes herself. The man who educated her kept telling her that she must pay back what he did for her, and she has taken a notion to pay the debt by giving the sum of it to you people here. That is what she means when she says that anything she does for you is already paid for. I suppose you know that her guardian died not long ago without leaving her anything, and that she now hasn't any money at all except what she makes by teaching."

The green cabbage stalks got in another dig of revenge on the slumbering Sue just at this moment, and the mother's surveillance was momentarily diverted from the old woman. Grandma saw her opportunity, and leaned forward with a cunning, hideous leer as she replied:

"Now you ain't a-foolin' o' me. You an' me know whar Ma'y 'Lizbeth kin git all the money she wants!"

"Where?" Marshall's sharp question brought the daughter-in-law to her post again and made even the phlegmatic Shan sit up suddenly, wide awake. But it was too late—grandma had taken the bit between her teeth.

"Whar can she git all the money she wants?" she

repeated to the electrified group. "Git it whar she gits all her candy an' goodies an' that thar ridin' horse an'——"

"Shut that up, or by God! I'll——"

Marshall had sprung to his feet and slung aside a chair that intervened between himself and Shan Thaggin. The other had started up, too, and was cowering and shivering against the mantel-shelf.

"You answer me, *you!*" the terrible stranger raged at him. "Does that woman know what she's saying?"

"She knows what ever'body in the neighborhood is sayin'," screamed the old woman, but this time the daughter-in-law shut her up literally by clapping her strong hand over her mouth and holding it there.

"I ain't got nothin' 'tall to do with hit," chattered Thaggin between his uncontrollable teeth. "Hit's all women's talk—hit ain't none o' me!"

"Well, by the Lord Harry, I'll *give* you something to do with it!" Marshall was whiter than the shivering creature before him, but with a whiteness that augured ill for the thing that was in his path. "I'll *give* you something to do with it! Now then! You keep these women's mouths shut on that subject or I'll beat *you* into a jelly! Understand? Don't you ever let anybody hear again one breath from one of them against that girl——"

"La, mister!"—the younger Mrs. Thaggin had released her hold on the old woman's mouth to throw herself between her cowering husband and

the enraged stranger—"la, mister, Shan ain't been sayin' a thing! Please, sir, don't hurt him!"

Shan seized the circumstance of his wife's intervention to put temptation out of the stranger's way—decamping through the back door into the rainy darkness as fast as his wobbly legs would carry him. With Shan out of harm's way, the old mother got in a last shot:

"I know one mouth what you can't shet—you limb o' Satan!—Millie Davis won't be takin' her orders from you, an' when she makes that gal move outen her house like she says she's a-goin' to, everybody in the countryside will know why!"

The younger woman clapped her hand over the other's mouth again and looked up to see that the stranger's face had grown ashen. He turned without another word, flung on his raincoat, and strode out of the door. Before he could release the lighted lantern from the nail on which he had left it hanging in the entry, however, Shan Thaggin's wife was by his side.

"Mister," she said pleadingly, "I—I—don't want you to think I been talkin' 'bout Ma'y 'Lizbeth! Hit ain't b'cause I'm skeered o' you that I say it. I'm jes mortal sorry for the child, an' I know hit's all black lies that they're a-tellin' on her——"

The man raised the lighted lantern to her face to find that her eyes were streaming with tears. An answering something softened the blaze of his own.

"They *are* all black lies they are telling on her," he said, with visible emotion. "She is the purest woman in the whole world!"

"I know it—I know it—" Melissa Thaggin was saying to him, "an' I done promised Uncle Beck Login to befriend her—but you see what I've got ag'inst me—" she was wiping away the tears as she spoke. The stranger's eyes suddenly took on a reflective expression.

"Why, you are the one that Babe Davis told me was her friend," he said, kindly. "I'm sorry for your sake that I had to raise this devil's row to-night. But your husband will have to control his mother's tongue, let him know that."

"I'll do hit, mister, I give you my word I will. She ain't never to open her head ag'inst Ma'y 'Lizabeth ag'in while the world stands! An'—an'—say, mister, the trade ain't off, is hit?" Something kindled in the man's eyes that as quickly died. His face was uninterested as the woman pleaded further: "We done kinder made our plans,—an' we'd hate mighty bad to lose out now. Ef you jes wouldn't pay no 'tention to ma, I'd keep her shet up, I sho would."

"Why," said the stranger, thoughtfully, "this hasn't anything to do with the trade as far as I am concerned, but it will surprise me if the old woman can be persuaded to sign the deeds now."

"Leave that to me an' Shan, mister."

"All right, I'll pay you your money when the papers are signed—every dollar of it cash, remember that. But this talk about Mary Elizabeth has got to stop, now and forever; keep that with you before everything else. I don't want ever to hear another breath of it. Understand?"

The woman's eyes took on their scared look again, and she protested:

"La, mister, you ain't a-goin' to blame hit all on us! I kin keep ma shet up like I told you, an' Shan's done got his dost; but you can't stop a whole passel o' women from talkin', you know that yourse'f."

His face went white again. "Mrs. Thaggin," he said, in a moment, "why should they condemn that child on such ridiculously slight evidence? Isn't it that they are just prejudiced anyhow, and are glad to seize on any story against her?"

"Of course, mister, that's exactly hit."

"Well, isn't there any way under the sun to sweep away this old prejudice—the foundation of all this enmity? Wouldn't the people come to their senses and judge her rightly if that could be done?"

Suddenly, with a grip that startled the woman, he grasped her shoulder and exclaimed tensely: "Say, if she were to do some great good thing for the people—if she were to do something which proved that her whole heart was with them against—against me and my interests—against everything that I could do to the contrary—wouldn't that win them over to her? *Wouldn't* it? Wouldn't that show them that this infernal talk is a lie?"

"Why, sho, mister, but that ain't likely to happen," and her eyes filled with tears again.

But the man was for some reason intensely excited. "Good-by," he exclaimed, as if some overmastering impulse had seized his will and were

driving him forward. "Good-by. Be good to her, now, will you? *Won't* you be good to her?"

When John Marshall rode through the Thaggins' lowered bars that night and set his face against the driving sleet and rain, one idea possessed him, and only one. The hardening sleet beat against his breast, but his heart was on fire. He took wind and rain and ice-needles, head-on, realizing little and fearing less the fury with which they opposed him, for the storm that raged within him dwarfed their angry onslaughts till he was scarcely conscious that they assailed. The very play of the wild lightning threatened in vain.

He did not think. He was too deeply stirred to think, but every fibre of his being was sentient of one great fact.

No, it was not the sudden blast right out of the north that set his strong jaw with sinews of iron, that sent that fierce riot through his veins; the night, with its sleet and rain and wind and fire, was merely an incident!

CHAPTER XVII

WINTER had smiled again. In the warmth of but three fleeting hours of sunshine the sleet had gone from the hills, the winds were still, and the bare, brown bushes had begun to dream good resolutions of turning over new leaves.

Only last night the north wind had swept the little valley with a rain of ice; but this morning, if there was any air at all astir, it was a tender breath right out of the South. It was winter's day of atonement, and nothing was lacking from the scene to make amends for her cruelty of the night before. Even that flock of gray doves, glinting across the landscape in the shimmering sunlight, seemed offered as an earnest of peace.

The Southern winter is a tricky damsel and is liable to do almost anything at any time. She has a way of hitting you hard one day, and laughing at you the very next—pretending that she didn't mean it and is hurt with you that you can't take a joke. It is a favorite prank of hers to furnish out-of-door roses for the Christmas table, then coat the ungathered buds with ice on the twenty-sixth day of December; and she has an infernal little way of coaxing out the peach blossoms long before there is a shadow of excuse for their appearance, and then nipping off the young

fruit even before the small boy has had a chance at it. When she is really spiteful, she sends the warm sap surging up the young shrubs all out of season, only to condemn the too trusting plants themselves to an everlasting sleep in a shroud of snow and ice when they are at her questionable mercy.

On this particular morning, however, she was smiling, placating, trying to make friends.

But the dreaming stir in the brown woods, the promise of spring in the air—even the symbols of peace themselves, softly lilting along the sunlight—were lost on the man who had breasted last night's storm unheeding, and was now making his way, unheeding still, to a fateful objective.

It was nine o'clock and after when John Marshall spurred his horse across the gully where the Davises' front gate should have stood, and rode up to the front porch of the cabin home.

He did not dismount, but helloed lustily in conformity to the custom of the hills. The door of the little porch-room, which was slightly ajar, closed softly and promptly—he saw it because he had not been able to keep his eyes off it. In a minute or two an angry-eyed, hawk-featured old woman opened the door of the main room and came out on the threshold. Her lips were parted to answer Marshall's hail, but as soon as her piercing eyes ran him through, she set her jaw in grim silence and waited for him to speak.

"Is your son, Babe Davis, at home, madam?" That the question was not what she expected showed

plainly in her hard old face. Taken by surprise, she answered, but she bit off her reply till its briefness amounted to an affront.

"He be."

"I want to see him on business; will you be kind enough to tell him so?"

"He's over yander on the hill cl'arin' up the new ground, ef *you've* got any business with him." And she went in and slammed the door behind her. Marshall turned his horse toward the open and gave him such another impetus in the direction the woman had pointed that the old racing blood in him leaped in answer, and he took the long, low hill at a flying run.

Both horse and rider were breathing hard when they reached the summit, and stopped, almost too suddenly, in a partially cleared field—within twenty feet of where a strong-limbed, rusty native was hewing away stoutly at a rotting stump.

"Hello, Davis!"

The man stopped in his work and came toward him slowly, axe on shoulder. Marshall dismounted, flung his bridle over the pommel of his saddle, and gave Selim a slap that sent him cropping the dry grass some yards away.

"You refused to shake hands with me when we met last," said he.

"Yes," said the native.

"You didn't trust me."

"No-o-o—yes—" said the native.

"Davis," the other continued after a pause, "it

is necessary for us to understand each other. I told you once that I did not love Mary Elizabeth, and it was true at the time I said it. But—I"—and his strong face became drawn—"I love her now. I have told her so. I have offered her ease and pleasure and wealth in exchange for what she considers her duty to you people here. She has—refused me. I have at all times acted honorably toward her— Do you believe that?"

The great expressionless eyes of the other had dimmed. "Yes, stranger," he answered, simply; "she 'lowed you had."

The stranger looked away across the seared fields for a moment and then said:

"I'm troubled, Davis."

"Is hit anything I kin help you about, stranger?"

"You are the one who can help."

"Say the word."

"Davis, do you remember that morning when you came gunning for me, and when I told you that Mary Elizabeth would need us both some day?"

The pupils of the other man's eyes were enlarging; he was looking John Marshall straight in the face.

"I remember."

"Well, that time has come."

"What you mean, mister? Say hit out."

He who had never before been squeamish in his choice of words, now all suddenly seemed to find his vocabulary failing him. "And you haven't heard that lying report?" he asked in a moment.

The crimson blood crept slowly up the throat of

the rustic and spread over his sunburnt face, dyeing it a yet deeper red. He gulped hard at a lump in his throat as he answered:

"Yes, I heerd hit. I'm jes layin' low tell I kin find the man what started hit. Did you want me to help you fix him?"

"If a man had started it, Davis"—his clinched fist emphasized his words on the top rail of the fence by which they were standing—"I wouldn't need any help. But it's the women that are talking it. Shan Thaggin's wife told me so herself. It was that old she-devil there that let out the report to me. It is all my fault," he continued, clearing his throat vigorously; "it was my unheeding, selfish blindness that brought this upon her. She's a *baby*—she didn't know. And I—I blundered."

"You thought b'cause you an' her knowed the books, stranger, an' we didn't, hit didn't make no diff'ence what we'uns thought."

"I may have been fool enough to *feel* that, Davis, but if I had ever *thought* the matter out, I would have realized that your public opinion could change the face of the whole world for her."

His strong, nervous hand was tearing at the split rail as he continued: "You see, she thinks she is in duty bound here, and that simply means that she is going to stay. She is utterly dependent on your people and at their mercy. She has no ties but these, no chance of friends but such as she can make here. And she has no means of support whatever but her pitiful little wages."

"She makes good money, stranger, an' she's got a good home for as long as she wants hit."

The stranger had turned away but now suddenly faced about again. "Davis," he said, between set teeth, "your mother is threatening to turn that child out of doors, *disgraced*."

The ashen-gray of the other man's face was his answer, and Marshall continued, a little quickly: "But, after all, that may not occur. I believe, I hope, that there will be some happenings here which will put Mary Elizabeth right with your people. The danger is they may come too late to save her——"

"*Too late?*" the other interrupted, hoarsely.

"Too late to keep this thing from breaking her heart—from breaking her frail woman's spirit. Davis, —it's going to kill her to hear that slander!"

"Could you an' me an' a couple o' guns cl'ar up the siterwation a bit, stranger?"

"No, we can't shoot women. And a move on our part now would be the surest way of sending the whole damnable story to her."

"Then, stranger, what must I help you do?"

"Help me to keep her from knowing of this talk till she is put right with the people and their infernal gossip is swallowed up in gratitude. Silence that mother and that brother of yours——"

"You're a-talkin' 'bout *my* mother an' *my* brother, stranger."

"I am talking for the girl who has no brother, and to the man who, with his gun across his saddle,

warned me that he was going to stand to her in the place of one."

The blood had receded from the face of the other man, leaving it blue-white about his pinched nostrils, but he looked John Marshall steadily in the eye as he returned, quietly: "Say on, stranger."

Then Marshall told him Horton's camp story about the death of Welch Dale; but he saw no surprise in the eyes of the man until he named the murderers.

In the startled expression of the rustic, fear followed quickly on the heels of surprise, and then conviction—which, however, repudiated any forgiveness for Marshall's having recited the unwelcome truth—suffused the whole. Marshall caught the look and its meaning.

"Davis," he said with sudden emphasis, "if we are to take care of Mary Elizabeth, we will have to put ourselves and our personal feelings out of the question. We must think only of her, and keep her before us till we go to the bottom of this and learn what to do for her. Mary Elizabeth," he continued—perhaps he repeated the name on purpose to exorcise the demon he saw rise in the spotted face of the other man—"Mary Elizabeth, being the child of that man, has inherited, so to speak, the hatred of both your brother and Trav Williams. It must be that way, for there is absolutely nothing in what the girl herself has done to warrant their hate. Now this is why I tell you an ugly truth about your own brother: I know that when these people generally come to

find out what Mary Elizabeth is doing for them—and they will find out, for she is going to tell them in spite of me—they will be crazy about her; but I am not at all sure that Williams and Bud Davis will ever cease to hate her. I hope that they will, but I am doubtful. Now, if they do not, they are likely to concoct some other devilish scheme against her even if this one fails.”

Babe Davis was struggling to speak, but his throat and lips were dry. After an effort he said hoarsely:

“I ain’t gone nowhar.”

“No, nor I either. Now, see here, I’m hoping that when the truth is known everything will be all right, and that this talk will die a natural death without Mary Elizabeth’s ever hearing it. But if it doesn’t, Davis, if it *doesn’t*, that’s what you and I have got to take care of.”

Again the name of Mary Elizabeth worked its magic, and Babe replied: “I’m ready, stranger, but how?”

“God knows!”

“Ef Ma’y ’Lizabeth wa’n’t so wilful——”

“If she only wasn’t!”

“We kin tell better when the time comes.”

“Yes, yes, but in the meantime, can you handle the situation there at home? Can you keep your mother and Bud from telling her that damned scandal?—Nobody else is apt to repeat it to her.”

“I’ve kept ’em from blabbin’ it to her so fur, stranger, but ma’s ’bout to bust.”

“Well, keep her quiet at any cost. And you,

Davis, when Mary Elizabeth tells what she knows about me, make much of the fact that she has sided with you all *against* me—that's what is going to save the situation, if anything can."

Something that had flickered once or twice in the dull eyes of the rustic now struggled to light up again as Marshall continued: "And don't let any lingering memory of the fact that you and I have a friendly agreement on this subject, make you spare me any, in speaking of me to the others, if that will help the child herself. It may be that the blacker I am painted, the more they will realize what she is struggling to do for them."

Selim had strayed up to within reach, and Marshall laid hold of the bridle and put his foot in the stirrup. As he drew himself up into the saddle, Babe Davis asked, with his dull eyes alight now:

"Stranger, *what in the hell have you been doin'?*"

The stranger looked down at him with something akin to regret in his fine eyes. "Something that Mary Elizabeth has opposed me in every step of the way, for your sakes," he replied.

"*What?*"

"Mary Elizabeth will tell you—will tell you in spite of me— But—say, Davis, haven't we got enough of the man in us to stand together in befriending her, even though we should be against each other in other things?"

"Hit strikes me that we have, stranger."

"Then, no matter what else happens between us, can I depend on you to join me if at any time there

is anything we can do for her? And will you keep me informed as to how things are going with her?"

"You kin depend on me."

"Davis, if she should need any money—I——"

"So could I, stranger, an' I'm closter to her than you air."

There were several minutes of silence between them, and then the stranger said, in a voice that had in it a distinct note of sadness:

"Davis, I shall be sorry to lose your friendship."

And he turned his horse into the way that he had come, and rode at an unsafe speed straight back to the Davis cabin.

Arrived at the steps again, he did not hello, but instead dismounted at the porch, and, presenting himself at the door which the hawk-eyed old woman had slammed against him less than an hour before, knocked loudly for entrance. At a quavering "Come in" from within, he pushed the sagging door open and entered.

It was the first time that he had been inside the cabin, and the strangeness of the place, and the seeming darkness of it—for he had come in out of the glare of the morning sunlight—confused his sight for a moment.

In the next, however, his vision cleared, and he saw before him, backed against the side of the large chimney-piece as if for support in face of his effrontery, the girl who held, to every spark of chivalry within him, the most delicate, the most peculiar claim.

The light that struggled through the deep cabin window fell directly upon her. It seemed to Marshall that she was more ethereal, more spiritually beautiful than ever before; and he in all whose universe was never a niche for haloed saints, suddenly felt that he would like to concentrate the rays behind her pure and perfect face.

That girl! And *that* story! The man's blood went booming and pounding through the brain of him. It was a question whether he could command the proper even calm of voice in speaking to her.

She was looking straight at him now.—No, she had not heard the story!

"I have come to tell you," he found himself saying very gently, "that I release you from all obligation to silence concerning anything that you have learned about me or from me. It is not too late for you to save the cause of your people; but to do it, you will have to win them all to your side. You will have to show them that your whole heart is with them—because—because—they are suspicious, you know. Williams and Bud Davis, here, and Sykes could help you most, if you would go at them right—if you would make friends with them."

"Oh, *don't!*"

The exclamation seemed to have slipped out unawares. The girl who said it and the man who heard it looked at each other. The triumphant joy that he had expected to see spring to her eyes was swallowed up in something that he did not understand.

Just then the sound of an opening door at the back drew the girl's glance away, but Marshall did not look around. He guessed shrewdly that some one had opened the door to listen, so he pretended not to hear the interruption. When he spoke, he purposely raised his voice so that it could be distinctly heard, and he chose his words with his mind on the unseen listener.

"I am sorry that our pleasant little association is at an end, Miss Dale, but since you choose to be a friend to these people here instead of a friend to me, of course—as you wrote me yourself—there is nothing more to be said between us." He bowed courteously, but distantly, and withdrew from the room.

He was descending the steps, Mary Elizabeth could hear him as he went; he was mounting Selim now, for the creaking of the saddle announced the fact; and now he was riding away!

Mary Elizabeth laid hold of the mantel-shelf, for the floor beneath her was threatening to give way. Aunt Millie came in from the back porch and looked at her hard and long, but the girl scarcely gave her a thought. Almost in a daze she slipped out of the room, and sought refuge among the friendly pillows of her own little bed where none could come and stare curiously at her, where she could puzzle out what had happened to her.

She was thinking of John Marshall and of what he had said to her; but, strange to say, it was no thought of the coveted privilege he had at last granted that most engaged her. It was what he

had said in parting that filled all her conscious thought. "Our pleasant little association," he had called those idyllic days in which—the world forgetting—they had spent hours and hours together with nothing more to be desired, at least by one of them.

That there was "nothing more to be said between them," was one thing for *her* to say; but for him to accept it as a finality, for him to be willing to say it for himself!—she told the rest to the pillow in which she buried her face.

But after a time it came to pass that Mary Elizabeth had to give account of herself. That was when, the storm abated, she sat up on the side of the bed, and, with her burning cheeks in her hands, demanded an explanation from herself.

Why had the sunlight faded just because John Marshall had accepted what she had been trying to force on him ever since her eyes had been opened? Why should she, who had never compromised with dishonor, give one instant's further thought to him?

Why had he come to her with what he had brought? And was it possible—just Heaven, was it possible—that she did not wish to disclose his villainy?—that she was sorry he had given her permission to speak?

Her head sank lower in her hands, but the crimson of her burning cheeks crept out beyond her screening fingers and tinged even her white forehead with the color of shame. A shower of brown curls, released by a falling comb, dropped about her bowed face as if to hide from the eyes of honest day the face

of a girl who was all but ready to betray her own people—who, down in the deepest depths of the false heart of her, yearned to turn traitor to the cause to which she had been consecrated by a memory that would not die.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Babe Davis returned from the new-ground that day at noon, and Bud came back, black-browed and ugly of mood, from an enforced working of the county road, Mary Elizabeth had defeated the tempter, self, and was ready to go all the way to the duty she saw before her.

But there was no thrill of triumph in the victory, no promise of joy in the way that she took. It had been forced upon her to sacrifice either the interests of her people or the interests of the man she loved. But he was wrong—the man she loved was wrong. And so it was that when the Davises, mother and sons and elfish grandchild, were gathered together for the noonday meal, a very white, a very wretched-looking girl came in to them with the announcement that she had bad news for them.

Mary Elizabeth did not sit down, but stood with her back to the chimney, facing the group. The others were seated around. Aunt Millie, who was waiting for the hoe-cakes to brown before serving dinner, stared at the girl with sinister speculation in her mean old eyes, while Bud glowered that so much attention should be accorded her, and "Surster" sucked her thumb in round-eyed wonder.

But in the erstwhile stupidly passive face of Babe, varying emotions were battling against each other.

Now red, now ashen, and gulping hard at an excitement that would not be swallowed, he looked from the girl to the others, and back to the girl again.

"I want to tell you all something that I've found out," began Mary Elizabeth, and the red went out of Babe's watching face. "This man, John Marshall, has a scheme on foot to get possession of all the land in this valley and then dam up the creek at the gap and cover your farms with a big lake. He's the one who has been doing all this buying for years, and he now has the titles to nearly all the lands here."

Babe Davis's face became the picture of open-mouthed, stupid bewilderment, and the steel of the old woman's glance struck fire, but distinct relief was brought to both when Bud spoke to the situation.

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth," he said, "ain't you got sense enough to know that the law ain't a-goin' to let him destroy my property, an' that I ain't, neither? He might could buy up ever' foot o' land but this here, an' still not be able to put a scheme like that th'ough. Why, he'd have to own *all* the land for that, an' he ain't likely to git this tell I'm dead an' rotten."

"Yes," the girl urged, the first tension of her mood giving way before a rising flame of indignant loyalty toward her own. "Yes, but he has found out that nearly all of you have never got good titles to your lands."

Bud Davis sat up with the growl of a wild beast.

"An' how in the hell do you an' him make *that*?"

"Why, why," said the girl, startled by his violence, "these were all government lands at first, and people

have to get out patent papers to government lands before they can hold them."

Every eye was upon her now. The listeners leaned forward as if by a common impulse. Not a sound was to be heard except the voice of the girl. "These papers were never got out by our ancestors. They merely took possession of the lands here—so this man says that we have no right to them, that they are still government property. And he is going to buy them or has already bought them from the United States government."

Then Mary Elizabeth unfolded at length the hateful story, dwelling on the facts that she thought would be difficult for their understanding.

The hoe-cakes were burning on the hearth, but the old woman's eyes were riveted on the narrator's face. During the whole recital the two men kept their eyes on her, breathless, unmoving; but when she ceased speaking, Bud got up from his chair and kicked it from him. Babe rose, too, brought to his feet by the look with which his brother was now regarding the girl.

"How come *you* know all this?" the black-browed, elder man demanded.

Babe promptly crossed over and took his stand between the infuriated questioner and the girl.

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, you don't have to answer that ef you don't want to," he said to her, and then he turned and looked straight into the face of his brother.

The old mother gave a little cry of fear, but Mary Elizabeth was already saying steadily:

"But I want to answer it, Babe," and then to the other: "I found out the main facts from a letter of Mr. Marshall's and he told me the rest."

"How long have you knowed hit?" Bud asked, with his eyes narrowing to a black line of hate.

"Oh, for several weeks," the girl answered, with some consternation, "but I was in honor bound not to tell." She waited a moment for him to question further, and then asked: "Is there anything else you want to know?"

"No, *that's a plenty*," the questioner answered.

Babe started, and shot a swift, apprehensive glance into the eyes of the girl. But she evidently had not caught the covert meaning in the reply, so he turned to his brother again, this time to give him a long, level look—a look so piercing and so significant that the other man's black gaze gradually sank before it. And then Babe did the unheard-of thing in his history, of giving an order in that house. Turning upon the old woman who sat shivering before what she saw, he said, peremptorily:

"Git up an' put that dinner on the table!" The order proved an escape-valve for the tenseness of the situation. In a few minutes more their relations had seemingly returned to the normal. Aunt Millie had set about rescuing the hoe-cakes from the burning, after having slapped Sister by way of relieving her feelings, and Mary Elizabeth was taking up the turnip greens from a pot that stood on the open hearth. Bud had gone out on the back porch to wash his hands.

Babe was left looking into the fire—looking and looking and looking for something that he did not find.

When they were gathered together again around the table, Mary Elizabeth related fully the details of what she had learned, including an account of Marshall's seizure of the haunted house. Then she outlined to them her plan for saving the situation, which was that they make common cause against Marshall and fight him to the end of the law. And she told them how her guardian, under what she thought were similar circumstances, had saved the land in a contest for the squatter settlers.

She was making the effort of her life to placate the saturnine elder brother, for she felt the force of John Marshall's advice on the subject, though she had no way of guessing from what it sprang. But her every advance, her every reference to her community of interest with them, was repulsed by Bud Davis with some manifestation of implacable hatred; and when she assured him that she was going to throw her whole heart into helping defeat Marshall's scheme, he growled out something about their being able to settle the matter without her meddling, and got up noisily from the table.

Mary Elizabeth, hurt and bewildered, left the room to shiver in the pale sunshine on the front steps, and Babe made as though he would follow her, but before he was well on his feet Bud was saying to their mother:

"She's turned ag'in him 'cause he's throwed her

off. You see she's been in with him. He told her all about hit, hisself, an' she kep' hit all tell he give her the go-by, an' then she turned in to ruin him. Purty tale 'bout that place o' Silas's. She handed hit over to him, that's what!"

Babe stopped long enough to say, quietly—too quietly for the girl on the front steps to hear:

"She ain't to be told that, understand?" When he turned his blue-white face from them and went out, closing the door behind him, the mother and the son inside looked at each other.

Outside, Babe was taking a seat on the step beside the bewildered girl, and was saying in a shaking voice:

"You made a mistake, Ma'y 'Lizabeth, you made a mistake!"

"Oh, how, Babe?"

"You oughter told me or Uncle Beck, or somebody like that, fust."

"But you surely want this man stopped, don't you?"

"By God, yes!" he exclaimed with a flash. "But Uncle Beck an' me an' some o' the yuthers could a-got the thing in hand before—before—well, no matter now." And he rose to go to his work in the new-ground. Mary Elizabeth accompanied him part of the way that she might talk with him more fully.

Almost the first sentence that passed his lips when they were far enough away from the cabin to make conversation safe, was to question why it was that

she had not been free to tell them of Marshall's scheme sooner.

Then Mary Elizabeth told him the part of the story that she had kept back from the others, of how she had come to read the letter, of how Marshall had kept her silent through her sense of honor, and of how, to-day, barely two hours ago, he had come to her and given her permission to tell—to tell not only what she had read in the letter, but all that he had confided to her as well. And she told him also how John Marshall had urged her to make friends with Bud and with Trav Williams and Mr. Sykes.

They were some distance from the cabin, out beyond a sheltering thicket, when the girl reached this part of the story. Suddenly she faced him and put one hand on the lapel of his coat to stop him.

"Babe," she aimed, "what I can't even make a guess at is *why* Mr. Marshall came to me with that permission."

All at once the groping, mystified look that made its home in the great ox-like eyes of the man, gave way to one of astounded speculation.

"By gum!" was all that escaped him.

"What, Babe, what?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'!"

"But it is something, Babe, what is it?"

"Nothin', nothin'," he put her off with. "Hit's jes all so tur'ble *mixed*."

Hereupon, Babe peremptorily sent her back to the house with orders not to "pester" his mother and Bud, but to go to her own room and stay there. Then

he took his way straight out the new-ground road, but looked back, now and again, to note her progress homeward.

When the girl was well out of sight, however, the man turned sharply to the left and went swinging through the long, dry grass and low underbrush of an adjacent field toward an objective that was most certainly not the new-ground he was clearing. Half an hour later he presented himself at the door of the haunted house and knocked for admittance.

The door was opened promptly by John Marshall. Something hung in his right hand at his side. The rustic saw it. He showed two empty hands to Marshall, and the latter turned and tossed the shining something over on the bed.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside—and then—"Sit down."

The other obeyed mechanically, and Marshall took a chair on the opposite side of the table which had been drawn up near the fire. That the girl had told her story was written all too grimly on Babe Davis's face.

The two men sat in a strange silence for some minutes, then Marshall said, with evident effort: "Davis, I have never intended to do *you* a hardship. It has always been my plan to give you something——"

"Stranger," and a quiet, steady tap of a long, bony finger on the table between had something ominous in its nervous repression, "stranger, the man ain't livin' what could *give* me a dollar, or take a foot of

land away from me. An' that's all I've got to say about that part of hit now. We'll settle that between us later, an' settle hit for good an' all. I—I—come for sump'n else."

"What?" Marshall was regarding him intently.

The other man turned squarely facing him, he laid a tense hold on each side of the pine table, he all but rose from his chair as he asked with repressed excitement:

"*Did you* let Ma'y 'Lizbeth tell on you so she might could make peace with our folks—make the folks b'lieve in her—so they would stop that damn talk?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell me to run you down to the people an' paint you black so they would think the more of her—did you do that a-purpose—for her?"

"Yes."

"An' did you know what hit all was bound to lead to *for you*?"

They looked into each other's eyes and then both glanced at the weapon Marshall had thrown on the bed.

"I am not a fool," said the man questioned.

Babe Davis drew a long, deep breath. "Stranger," he said, in slow incisive tones, "stranger, hit do look like hit takes more'n money an' book learnin' to take the *man* out'n a man!"

"We are all of us sad mixtures at best," was the stranger's reply. There was another silence, and then Marshall asked:

("How did the others take it? Did your brother hear her when she told it?"

Babe Davis hesitated a moment, and then repeated what Bud had said to their mother as he himself had left the room.

Marshall's face blanched under the bronze of its weather stains at the fiendish and unexpected misinterpretation of the girl's act. "Good Lord, Davis, what are we going to do with her?" he burst out.

"I'll take keer o' Ma'y 'Lizbeth," the other answered; "you've got to git out o' this."

"What do you mean?"

"You got to leave here, an' that quick. I—I—can't let you git in trouble after what you done for Ma'y 'Lizbeth."

"I'm not going when she is in danger of persecution."

The native looked up with a start at the quiet finality of the voice. "But s'pose sump'n should happen to you," he protested.

"See here, Davis, I'm not exactly hankering after getting shot, but I haven't got the slightest notion of letting any two or three men I ever saw make me turn tail and run when it's my business to stand my ground. It's my business now to take care of that child."

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth is *ourn*, stranger; you ain't responsible——"

"She's mine to protect," the other interrupted grimly, "and by the white soul of her, I'm going to do it!" He had risen and was now looking down on

Babe with his arms folded and his strong jaw set. "And don't you be uneasy about me, Davis. I am quite as capable of making things happen as even Trav Williams, when the devil in me gets stirred up."

The other rose too. He put on his old wool hat and pulled it down carefully all around his head and face. He buttoned up his threadbare coat and moved toward the door, but there he stopped, hesitating.

"Stranger," he said slowly, "hit ain't no question of 'two or three' others. Thar ain't a man in this valley what wouldn't let daylight th'ough you for takin' a chaw o' terbacco 'way f'm him when he didn't want you to have it."

"But if I had paid for the tobacco, Davis, I'd be apt to take it whether he wanted me to or not."

The hillite gave him one of his black, ugly looks, but by the time he had the door open, his mood was tempered again.

"Mister," he said, "hit's proned into me that you'd better let me tell Ma'y 'Lizbeth the whole truth—tell her what you done for her. Mebbe hit would make her less servigrous to'ards you, an' that would mebbe make things more easier on you."

John Marshall turned and looked in the fire. His big chest swelled with a sudden spasm. A fierce hope had sprung to his eyes.

When he turned again to his tempter, however, the light of something unexplained had transfigured his burning glance.

"No, Davis, no," he said finally. "She's a frail little thing, and she would not be able to stand it—at least, not without help. You see," and his eyes softened infinitely, "there is not a woman in all her world here to take her in her arms and comfort her. There's nobody who cares for her except us two big-footed, blundering men, and we wouldn't answer to help a girl bear up under a thing like that."

Babe Davis stood for some moments with his arrested hand on the latch, then the door closed on him without another word between him and the stranger.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Babe Davis closed the door of the haunted house between himself and the inexplicable stranger, instinct, rather than reason, sent him, stumbling, flying, panting, toward the cross-roads store. He did not take time to go back home for his usual Saturday companion, the flea-bit mule, but he couldn't have told why. He avoided the highroads of country travel and took the way that the crow flies with much the same wild instinct. He did not plan, he did not reason, he did not deliberate. He was going straight to Beck Logan, but only his subconscious self and his God knew why.

And he might himself have seen a "ha'nt" that walked those hills when at length, white-faced with something more than fatigue, he broke out of the scrub-oak thicket near the back of the store, and stood stock-still for some minutes to get himself in hand. He was going to have to face the congregated men of the countryside, for this was Saturday afternoon; and he stopped to think now, for the first time.

The bluff that he put up in looking as if nothing had happened failed miserably, however, for even he could see that something in the look of him created a sensation when at length he entered the store. But the sensation was a suppressed one, for there

was that in the look of Babe Davis that silenced gibe and challenge, and sent the others in little segregated groups, to wonder to each other in subdued tones.

"Sump'n's happened over to the Davises'," Ri Slaton said in an aside to Trav Williams, and Trav answered, uneasily:

"I wonder whar Bud's at."

That something had happened "over to the Davises" was the conclusion to which the others jumped, too. Indeed, it was what most of them had been expecting, for Bud's hatred toward the school-teacher, and Babe's silent worship of her, had become themes of current comment among them, while every man there had heard the gossip about the girl and the stranger. So when Babe deliberately drew Beck Logan apart from them to the seclusion of the boarded-off post-office corner and closed the dividing door, there was nothing short of consternation among them.

It was out of the question, now, for any of them to leave; being neighbors to the Davises, they must stay and see this thing out. Even the two loungers from over the ridge—foreigners, so to speak—put down the saddle-bags which they were in the act of gathering up when the ghastly looking Babe came into the company, and decided to rest a spell before taking their departure.

It was but a poor attempt they all made at general conversation during that seemingly interminable time in which the partition door of the post-office corner remained shut against their excited curiosity.

But all things come to those who wait long enough, and just as the foreigners, despairing, were about to give up resting and take their homeward way over the distant ridge of hills, the long-watched partition door opened.

Uncle Beck issued first, and there was a preternaturally calm, reassuring look on his shrewd old face; but the countenance of Babe Davis, who followed in his wake and stood silent beside him, gave the lie to his cheerful effrontery.

"Boys," said Uncle Beck in a businesslike tone—and they closed around him in expectant quiet—"boys, thar's a little trouble a-brewin', an' we've got to look into hit together. Now Babe, here, *he's* oneasy; but I says to him, says I, 'Why, Babe, you talk like the men in this here neighborhood was on-reasonin' childern, when they've got a reputation all over the country for bein' fair-minded, thinkin', high-toned men. Why,' says I to Babe, 'didn't them candidates that come th'ough here last summer from way down 'bout Mobile, say we was regyarded ever'-whar as bein' the most level-headed men in the State? Wa-al,' says I to Babe, 'do you s'pose for a minute that men like that won't act up to the reputation they've done made for theirselves? No,' says I, 'I'm goin' to put this matter *right into their hands*; I'm a-goin' to tell 'em the whole truth, an' let 'em act together.'"

The assembled company stood up noticeably taller, and there was a general modest clearing of throats; but Babe Davis's mouth had dropped open, and he

was regarding the storekeeper with an expression of utter astonishment, as the old man continued:

"'An' more'n that,' says I to Babe, 'ef they even choose to send me to town to a lawyer to find out exactly how this here muddle stands, I'll go without a protest; b'cause,' says I, 'I know these men, an' I know they air a-goin' to expect me to act with 'em in what they decide, in their own good judgment, to do.'"

Babe Davis drew his coat-sleeve across his eyes as if to clear his vision, and stared again at the storekeeper.

"What's the trouble, Beck? Le's have it," came from one of the self-conscious, but impatient, listeners. There was an uneasy but quiet shifting in the crowd. They closed in a little more. They bent forward slightly to hear Beck Logan's answer.

"Why," replied the old man in a tone of frank confidence, "Ma'y 'Lizbeth Dale has been playin' a sort o' detective game all these months, an' has got onto sump'n that seems to threaten our interests here. She suspected this here man, Marshall, of underhandedness from the very jump, an' she made up her mind to watch him. So she pretended to be powerful friendly-like an' sociable with him, jes to git to keep her eye on him—" The listeners looked at each other with dawning wonder in their eyes. Babe Davis sat down as suddenly as if his legs had given way under him.

"Yes," said the old man, nodding his head and smiling as if delighted at the idea, "that slip of a

gal! Would you a-thought she had it in her? But that's the way with womenfolks—you never can calc'late on what they air goin' to do next!"

"What is that man Marshall up to?" one of them interrupted with, and the growl with which the questioning demand was accompanied ran through the assemblage like a ground-swell. Men began to whisper, each to each. Trav Williams, black-browed, threatening, and uncommunicative, sat apart.—The old man saw that he must keep his reins well in hand.

"Wa-al," said he promptly, "that's what us men have got to look into. You see, we can't afford to take a woman's judgment 'bout things—women not bein' smart in their minds like men. I'm free to say that Ma'y 'Lizbeth Dale has got ra-al good wit for a gal, but she has got things mixed. somehow, an' we've got to take the clue that she has skeered up, ontangle the mess she's made of hit, an' see whar hit leads."

"Yes, Beck, but what about *Marshall*?" another demanded, and the question was instantly echoed in several directions.

"Wa-al," said the old man calmly and almost cheerfully, for he knew the men he was handling, "wa-al, neighbors, John Marshall is mixed up with a sale of gover'ment lands, hereabouts, an' I don't like the looks of the story; though, of course, onless you say I've got to go to town to find out the truth, I'll probably never know jes how hit is. Now *he*, Marshall hisself, I mean, told Ma'y 'Lizbeth a tale about his doin's here that anybody but a woman

would a-seen was a lie on the face of hit—the very idea! As if a man would fix up a plan that depended on secrecy for its success an' then go an' tell hit to a woman, an' tell her to publish hit from the housetops, besides!"

And then, without a glance toward Babe Davis, who had been reduced to a state of hopeless bewilderment, and with his voice every now and then breaking with laughter at the absurdity of the story, Uncle Beck related to them what John Marshall had told to Mary Elizabeth about his great reservoir scheme.

That laugh of the old storekeeper's saved John Marshall's neck that day.

"Now, ain't hit like a woman to b'lieve a cock an' bull story like that!" he would cackle. "As ef anybody out'n a lunatic asylum would a-told a tale like that an' give her permission *to tell us!* By gad, boys"—the situation was a tense one and no man knew it better than the storekeeper, who saw every lightning glance that played about in that lowering company and knew just what he had to laugh down—"by gad, boys, I'm afeard I'd a-mistrusted Ma'y 'Lizbeth, myself, ef John Marshall had a-told her that story an' ast her *not to tell*. Much as I like the gal, an' y'all know how I've stood up to her—I'm mightily afeard I'd a-thought she had at one time been in cahoots with Marshall"—the old man was playing his highest trump—"ef she'd a-said *he* told her *not to give his scheme away to us*. But John Marshall told Babe hisself—didn't he, Babe?—that he had done been up to Mis' Davis's an' give Ma'y

'Lizabeth permission to tell ever'body what he told her hisself 'bout his plans!"

Then Uncle Beck proceeded to narrate to them a new and unique story of Mary Elizabeth's struggles to outwit the mysterious stranger. And in that telling he put the girl before them in a peculiarly tender light. She belonged to them! In spite of her years of absence from them, in spite of the strange and estranging "raising" that had been hers, Mary Elizabeth had sided with her own when she might have had money—"big money"—and more fine things than that store would have held, if she had turned traitor to her own people—if she had married the wicked stranger as he had time and again begged her on his bended knees to do! And Mary Elizabeth had suffered, too, for old Silas's place had been taken from her.

But whenever the old man spoke of the stranger, his manner was strained. It was not that he justified in the slightest degree John Marshall's mysterious wrong-doing, for he did not. But he spoke absolutely without passion against this man about whom the most inflaming stories were being circulated. And only Babe Davis knew why, for Babe Davis had told him, confidentially, who had released this story of John Marshall's sin against them, for the telling, and why.

"Beck Login, s'pose this here tale about the reservoy should happen to be true?" Trav Williams spoke for the first time, and there was instant dead silence to hear the reply.

"Wa-al, s'pose hit should be true," cheerfully agreed the old man, "a smart man like you, Trav, don't need me to tell you that in such a case the only thing necessary to defeat Marshall's whole scheme would be to establish titles to one single piece of property in the valley." Some of the men had never heard of "titles" before, and the old man had to explain.

"Now," continued he, "don't ast me to s'pose that thar ain't nair one of you what's got a right to his *own* land, 'cause my 'magination ain't equal to hit. No, neighbors, I kin see th'ough a mill-stone as well as the man that made the hole in it; but ef hit'll make Trav, here, any happier, I'll git busy an' s'pose that John Marshall is fool enough to take us all into his confidence in his schemes ag'inst us. But even s'posin' that, neighbors, I'm here to tell you that the quicker you do as was suggested an' send somebody to inquire into your titles, the better hit will be for *you*."

In the pandemonium of questions and invectives which followed, the old man kept his characteristic, slow smile in easy call, and answered everybody with disarming frankness. He had drawn himself up to a seat on the high counter now, and the relaxed and careless attitude that he assumed was in its very self soothing and reassuring to them. It was not the first time that he had controlled them by his laughing philosophy, and his past experience with them stood him in good stead now.

"Yes," he would agree to one, "John Marshall's up to sump'n, an' we've got to find out what!"

"No," he would declare to another, "men like these ain't a-goin' to listen to none o' *that*! Men that have made a reputation for themselves all over the State by their clear-headedness ain't a-goin' to bus' loose an' do sump'n reckless an' silly before they make sure they air injured."

"Wa-al," he would concede to another, "sence y' all *insist*, I'll be the one to go an' look into the matter."

Now, in point of fact, no one as yet had insisted on the old man's undertaking an investigation for them. Indeed, no one had mentioned the idea but himself. But the old man knew the power of suggestion, through the wisdom of years, and he kept alluding to the idea which he himself had originally advanced as to a desire that was native with his hearers till it finally took root with them.

By the time that the others had talked off their first repressed excitement and were ready to listen to the old storekeeper again, there was the general feeling throughout the company that *somebody* had insisted on Uncle Beck's going to town to investigate the head and front of John Marshall's offending, and that it was a very wise plan, especially in view of the fact that they didn't really know that Marshall *had* offended, and also in consideration of the State-wide reputation which was theirs to sustain. In a few minutes they were discussing Uncle Beck's visit to "town" as a foregone and definite conclusion; and when he told them about the "abstract office" where one could find out all there was to know

about lands, it was finally decided among them that he must go at once.

The old man's stroke of state came, however, when he explained that he just naturally had to have the "smartest" and "likeliest" one of the bunch to go with him to town and see the thing through.

"An' when I say 'smartest' an' 'likeliest,'" said the shrewd old fellow, "y' all know mighty well who I mean." And his big hand descended on the shoulder of Trav Williams, who still sat apart, uncompromising.

Trav's black brows cleared in spite of himself, but he began, doggedly:

"I ain't got no time to go——"

"Yes, you have, Trav Williams," it was Uncle Beck again; "I've knowed you fifty-six year, an' I've never seen you yit when you didn't have time to do your patriotic duty. Yes, boys, Trav says he'll go, an' go gladly, an' that he'll git to the bottom of this trouble for you, ef he has to run my damned old legs off."

Trav couldn't help joining in the laugh that followed, and in a few minutes it was decided that the two should leave that very afternoon to catch the first train.

After arrangements had been agreed upon, and the general feeling established that immediate and decisive action was in progress, Uncle Beck got their concerted attention again:

"Look a-here, boys," he said, "me an' Trav ain't a-goin' to go nosin' round an' stirrin' up trouble

for ourselves, mebbe, onless we kin feel that hit's goin' to be a ra-al benefit to y' all. We ain't a-goin' lopin' off on a errant like this for nothin'. Y' all have got to promise us that you won't do nothin' reckless an' foolish-like tell we have sifted this thing to the bottom, or we won't budge a step—will we, Trav?"

"No," said the man addressed, promptly, "ef we air to take the matter in hand, hit must be in our hands; an' we don't want to be made fools of by any interference."

There were hasty assurances of perfect quiescence on the part of the others, for Trav had spoken with finality; but Uncle Beck didn't rest until he had called each man by name and made him promise not to make any move in the premises until the two envoys should return and point the way.

All he asked of them now, he explained, was for them to keep the peace among themselves till he and Trav could test the probability of the stranger's threats, and could look into the matter of land titles. They had promised, he reminded them, and he had never known a hill-Billy to go back on a promise. With this much clinched, he pointed out to them that their agreement to remain hands off for a time comprehended, in the spirit of it, the keeping in check of the two who had not been there to join in the compact. Bud Davis and Shan Thaggin were missing. With this admonition in regard to them, the old man dismissed the two absentees from consideration. He knew that Shan would never hurt anybody unless by stumbling over him in full flight, and he

shrewdly suspected Bud Davis's liver to be whiter than his brutal violence of manner would seem to indicate. At any rate, Bud would not be likely to move till Trav Williams was free to act with him.

So it came about that Uncle Beck put the whole valley under a peace bond, and deliberately removed Trav Williams, the most violent of the number, bodily from the scene.

But before Uncle Beck left, however, he found the opportunity to say quietly to Babe Davis:

"I had to put hit that a-way, Babe. Ef I'd a-told 'em all o' the truth, John Marshall's skin wouldn't a-been whole tell sundown. On your life, now, don't you give hit away to 'em that hit's ra-ally true 'bout the fellow's damned rascality. Trav an' me will git a lawyer an' block his game—you needn't fear 'bout that; but, like you, I want him to git off with his life, an' he's a-goin' to do hit, ef I kin find the way."

That very afternoon, after he had forced the armistice, and while he was on his way to join Trav Williams for the long ride to the nearest railroad station, the old storekeeper met John Marshall, face to face, on a bridle-path.

The stranger would have passed with a formal "good-evening," but the native blocked his way. The two men looked at each other.

"Mr. Marshall," said the old man, quietly, "hit's proned into me that I ought to warn you to git away from here. Ma'y 'Lizbeth has done told the people 'bout your plans, an'—you can guess the rest.

They've promised to keep the peace for a few days, but after that thar ain't no answerin' for 'em."

The other man sat his horse in uncompromising silence for a moment or two, and then asked, with a distinct note of cynicism in his voice:

"And to what am I indebted for your confidence and advice?"

"To the fact that you acted square to Ma'y 'Lizbeth," the old man replied, simply. "Babe Davis told me all about hit, confidential."

The stranger removed his hat: "I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Logan, for your kindness," he replied with quick sincerity.

The sound of a horse's feet came to them from beyond a turn in the path, and, with only a quick look into each other's eyes, the two men simultaneously gathered up rein and departed on their separate ways.

The guardian spirit who watches over temperamentally combative men arranged to have the story against Marshall made public on a Saturday so that Uncle Beck's version would be sown broadcast before another could be submitted, for the guardian spirit of temperamentally combative men is a good sportsman and likes to give the quarry a chance for his life.

It was this spirit that sent Babe Davis straight from the interview with Marshall to the country store, to be closeted with the old postmaster for a quarter of an hour in the little post-office cupboard corner, where the version of the story to be sown was

hatched in the listener's scheming brain. And it was this spirit who decreed that Uncle Beck, the most beloved and revered man in the whole county, should be the one to make public the story. Perhaps it was this spirit guardian, too, who decreed that Bud Davis should take on an extra load of moonshine whiskey right after dinner, and lie drunk and asleep across the foot of his bed while his brother forestalled him in the telling of that marvellous story.

Late that same day, after Uncle Beck and Trav were well on their way to the station, Bud Davis put in an appearance at the store, to find, to his undisguised rage, that he had been forestalled in reporting the wonderful news.

The extra load of "moonshine" that had put him heavily asleep and delayed his joining the usual Saturday afternoon conclave at the store had worked almost irremediable havoc with his plans. He arrived on the scene to find his prop and stay, Trav Williams, spirited away by Uncle Beck, and the rest of the fellows pledged to keep the peace for a space—and all of them feeling grateful toward Mary Elizabeth.

It so happened that Babe had departed for home shortly after Uncle Beck himself had taken his leave, so when Bud arrived at the store, he had a clear swing, as it were. It did not take him many minutes to urge the truth of the story about John Marshall's plans to seize their property, and to put his own version of Mary Elizabeth's part in the affair before the assembled valleyites in very glaring colors.

When he was met with Uncle Beck's argument that Marshall would never have given Mary Elizabeth the right to tell that story if it had been true, Bud at once declared that Marshall must then have already succeeded in defrauding them, and have taken that way of breaking the news to them; and he had the satisfaction of seeing that he created a profound sensation. But, whereas if he could have made the initial statement to them he would probably have carried all before him, he could now feel that it was going to be almost impossible to remove the impression that Uncle Beck had made on some of them, and that even with those who were loud in their support of him there were signs of disturbing mental reservations. So, on the whole, Bud left the store that evening feeling that the others had not given him the support that his cause merited.

A night or two after that meeting, the stranger tenant of the haunted house paid another call at the Thaggin home under the cover of darkness, but this time grandma was not kept "heartened up" to see him.

Grandma was sick—very sick—she would not be in the way much longer. It was a question of only a few days now before Shan and Melissa Thaggin could convey the little homestead place to John Marshall for the dazzling price to which he had lately risen, without going through the formality of having grandma sign it with the sign of her cross.

Since the tempestuous interview with the stranger in which grandma had inadvertently been allowed

to open her mouth once too often, the old woman had steadily refused to allow the sale to be made; but her opposition had now ceased to disturb either her son or her daughter-in-law. They were content to wait. The flight of hours has little or no significance to the hillite, for his temperament has in it a touch of that sublime indifference to the passage of time that would seem to belong properly only to Deity.

But the other party to the pending contract enjoyed no such static calm. Recent developments made every moment count with him. To secure the Thaggin farm had now come to mean the consummation of the hopes and plans and ambitions of the best ten years of his manhood. Every other coveted foot of land was now in his grasp. But this one spot to which the resident held titles had to be regularly conveyed. It was the key to the situation. Its purchase meant success; its loss, disaster.

Only recently had Marshall come to realize how much of himself he had given to the scheme, what sacrifices he had made for it, what its success or its failure would mean to his future. Looking back now, he saw that from twenty-seven to thirty-seven it had filled his years. It was not that the scheme had taken much of his actual time, for it had not. During all those years he had apparently been in the very thick of life, taking his toll of ordinary pleasures from it, and adding his share to its ordinary achievements; but that was but the shadow of himself which had played out that part on the dead level of the

commonplace, the real man had been apart with his ambitions.

And what he had given to it was practically his all, for he had sunk the best part of what he owned in the furtherance of the project, and had, besides, borrowed heavily for his model-city scheme with this as his hope of ultimate solvency. Failure here meant, practically, financial disaster.

But it meant more than financial disaster. It meant—he believed it—his failure as a man. To begin with, his reputation hung in the balance. This project would stamp him either as a genius of finance, or the wildest of dreamers; it meant the world on his side, or the world against him. But it had a grimmer meaning still, for it involved in its consummation the demonstration of the man to himself.

Years ago John Marshall had assured the man within him that he possessed the ability to do big things, to conquer obstinate things; but the man within him had demanded proof. And through all these long years he had been struggling to demonstrate what, in the pride of his youth, he had thought ought to be accepted as a self-evident proposition. And now, just as he was about to write *Quod erat demonstrandum*, the Latin for "I told you so," and close the book, came this unknown quantity, this girl, and menaced his life problem with reduction to absurdity.

Did he have it in him to succeed? He could dream great things—yes, but any man could dream!

Fred Dearing had once said to him that half of life's great successes depend on their achievers' willingness to disregard their cost to others. His words came back to Marshall now, frequently. Well, in this one case, at least, Fred's theory applied. As long as he had disregarded the cost to others, just so long had all gone well; it was when he refused to sacrifice the girl to his project that his affairs had been thrown into chaos with almost certain ruin ahead, if not tragedy for himself.

But, after all, now was his real opportunity! To snatch success from the jaws of defeat were to succeed indeed! To precipitate chaos, to dare assassination, and *then* to triumph—what a chance for a man to prove the mettle of the pasture in which he was bred! His blood tingled at the thought that all the odds were against him, and by his own doing, too; and that now, if ever, he would silence all inward doubts as to his ability to do big things, and he would prove to Fred Dearing that a man may force success without the sacrifice of anybody who is fit to survive.

And so, while giving Mary Elizabeth the chance to prove to her people her loyalty to them against him, in the desperate hope of re-establishing her with them, he was doggedly pursuing his objective against fearful odds of his own deliberate making.

So he went to the Thaggins' that night to arrange for the transfer of the property as soon as grandma should be effectually silenced. And all arrangements were satisfactorily completed. Explanations of their

last wild meeting were made in which Shan protested his innocence of any intended harm to Mary Elizabeth, and his willingness, in fact, his impatience, to fight for her at the very first opportunity that offered; and the stranger made graceful amends for his too hasty judgment of him, taking good care, however, to nail Shan to his vow of friendship to the girl.

Marshall left the Thaggin house that night without having found out, or without even having suspected, that Melissa Thaggin was being kept by her husband in ignorance of his, Marshall's, proposed use of the property. Melissa had been detained close at home by her perfectly dutiful attendance on the sick woman, and recent heavy rains and consequent bad roads had discouraged visits from the neighbors. Only Shan came and went, and Shan held his peace. He had just about enough intelligence to guess what might happen if Melissa were to find out that in selling their property they would be selling their neighbors out of house and home, as well; so he determined that she should be kept in ignorance till her name was duly signed to the mysterious "papers."

The neighborhood was made up of many men of many meannesses, but in all that valley there was only one Shan Thaggin.

On the day following Marshall's second visit to the Thaggins, Mary Elizabeth heard the first news of grandma's serious illness; and as soon as she got back from school that day, she borrowed Sulphurina and rode at once to the store to ask Uncle Beck to "trust" her for a bottle of Dr. Beach's Consump-

tion Cure. But Uncle Beck was gone. The stable-boy clerk, however, was perfectly willing to charge the medicine against the teacher's next pay-day, so Mary Elizabeth took her way to grandma's through the gray darkness of a rainy winter evening in the hope that she was carrying the sufferer that which would bring joy to her fading eyes.

But grandma slept through the short time that she had to spend in her visit, so Mary Elizabeth and the younger Mrs. Thaggin, together with Sue, talked the time away in very earnest whispers.

And Mary Elizabeth was glad that it was so, for she had something to say to the two which would not remain unsaid. Only yesterday, she had heard of the proposed sacrifice of the childish, innocent, confiding Sue to Trav Williams, and the woman's soul within her had cried out against the sacrilege.

So in that interview she said to Melissa Thaggin what only one true woman can say to another on such a subject; and she said it without hesitation, without fear. When she had finished speaking, there was very little else to be charged against the character of Trav Williams; and mother and daughter had been made to view the girl's newly attained womanhood with eyes from which the scales had been stricken. Sue was crying on her mother's lap, and the mother was making her a solemn promise.

Mary Elizabeth went from that interview without having once mentioned John Marshall or his scheme. True, her mind had been full of him on her arrival, but she shrank from mentioning the recent

sensational story about him for the reason that she did not wish to seem to be bidding for praise on account of the part she had played in it. Then, she had been taken out of herself by her earnest fear for poor little ignorant Sue; and Marshall was forgotten until her attack on Trav Williams suddenly brought to mind his admonition to her to make a friend of the man. Then her fatal honesty got in her way again. Fearful lest she should let this ulterior motive come between her and this new thing that looked so much like Duty, she said a great deal more against Trav Williams than her actual knowledge of him justified.

And Mary Elizabeth departed in the growing dark, and Melissa Thaggin was left beside the sick woman to think it all over and to be dumbly grateful that this girl had suddenly waked to virile strength and self-consciousness the something in her that had been struggling to assert itself against this outrage. Melissa knew now that she was unalterably against this marriage, and she knew why, for Mary Elizabeth had voiced for her, her dumb soul-protest against it, and her awakened womanhood had cried a passionate "Amen." She would forbid the marriage, and she would stand out against it, even as she had promised her child.

And now, in view of the fact that she was going to have to oppose herself to Trav Williams—the hated, the feared—Melissa found comfort in remembering that she and hers would soon move entirely out of the neighborhood, and be far beyond the reach of its petty hates. She was glad, too, of the proposed

manner of their going, as decided on by Shan and the stranger, though at first she had protested against it. They were to keep their trade absolutely on the quiet and move out of the valley under the cover of darkness and secrecy—so it had been arranged by the two men. And speculating now on the wrath to come of Trav Williams, Melissa Thaggin thanked her kindly stars that she had been thus overruled in the manner of their leaving by her lord and master.

CHAPTER XX

ONE bleak morning, when the rains had ceased through sheer exhaustion, the news was carried about by a young Thaggin on horseback that grandma was dead, and there would be a "settin'-up" that night at the Thaggin homestead. Every face in the valley waxed solemn at the announcement, and every tongue grew glib with expressions of sympathy; but all the same, a thrill of something that was not sorrow ran through the neighborhood. From end to end it passed, and it came to a head in the cabin of Dilsey Sellers and the blind Lil.

Of all the social functions of a backwoods settlement a "settin'-up" is the most enjoyable. It has the quilting bee and the picnic beat so far that there is really no comparing them, and it can give even the camp-meeting cards and spades and come out ahead. Everybody goes to a settin'-up, menfolks and all, and nobody has to provide any of the victuals except the bereaved, who always lays in a bountiful supply. The settin'-up has no religious responsibilities like the camp-meetin', and it is an all-night performance—then, there's the corpse.

Yes, the neighborhood was thrilled; and as for Dilsey—why, Dilsey drew a long, injured sigh of relief at the prospect of receiving justice at the hands of her neighbors at last. It had all been very well for

Uncle Beck Logan to pat her on the back and admonish her not to let a coffin come between her and her neighbors as long as she could help it, but Dilsey had felt it—this having to keep the thing month in and month out, a-bankin' up lint under the bed and a-devilin' Lil,—and her blind, at that!

Grandma was dead. Those living nearest hurried to the scene to "wash" and lay out the corpse, and remained to help Melissa get ready for the supreme function. All the neighbors, near and far, or at least a representative from each household, found a means of coming over some time during the day to express sympathy with the Thaggins in their deep bereavement.

Mary Elizabeth heard the news, and promptly closed school out of respect.

John Marshall at the haunted house heard it, somehow, and without a moment's delay rode hard to the nearest railroad station and wired somebody to "come at once."

Everybody heard it and got ready for the night watch.

Scarcely had the winter twilight gathered her robes about her and stolen into the west, before the guests began to gather at the Thaggin home, to be received at the threshold by certain other guests who had been there all day helping, and who took charge of the new-comers with a tingle of self-importance at being "on the inside."

Everything was ready. The feather beds were puffed up with pride at being decked out in two of

grandma's best quilts, and the red and white of the hospitably inclined pillow-shams had been rendered redder and whiter by another laundering that very day. The whole room had been redde-up for the occasion.

Grandma lay in state in the centre of the room on a bier improvised from the borrowed door of the hen-house. Melissa's one pair of bleached sheets—it was the only time grandma had ever been allowed to sleep between them—draped the bier above and below the wasted alabaster figure. The top sheet was turned back midway, that the arriving guests might sate their morbid curiosity on the face of the dead. A saucer of salt had been placed on the stomach of the corpse to keep it from swelling. Thanks to Melissa, grandma was decked out in her best bib and tucker. Shan had growled at the extravagance of burying such good clothes, but for once Shan had been overruled. Melissa had made up her mind to give grandma a good send-off, and she had carried her every point. There was the matter of the coins on the eyes, for instance. Shan had actually been mean enough to suggest that nickels would do the work, but Melissa had put quarters there, and that in the full knowledge that it would be unspeakably unlucky to spend them after they had been dedicated to such a use! But the most thrilling thing of all was when Melissa took Shan's white silk handkerchief—the one he had bought to stick out of his pocket when they were married, and the very one he had “had on” when their tintypes were taken together—and

sacrificed it, too. Bringing its neat catacornered folds under the old woman's sagging jaw, Melissa had knotted the long ends over her thin gray hair, effectually shutting up grandma for the last time—and she tied it good and tight!

But Shan had one consolation—he made up for this prodigal waste of Melissa's by his trade for Dilsey Sellers's coffin. To begin with, Dilsey had bought the thing on the bargain counter and had herself got a sensational reduction on the first price of it; in the second place, Shan beat Dilsey down shamefully from the cost to herself on the plea that the coffin was second-hand. But "shamefully" is perhaps too strong a term to use in the light of what really transpired. The truth is, Dilsey tried to make Shan pay the first cost of the coffin to herself, plus the discount that the undertaker had made to her, on the theory that this wasn't bargain day. And she further contended that she ought to have some return for housing it so long, and for all the trouble she had had in keeping the peace between it and Lil.

The two had wrangled a good three-quarters of an hour over the trade—Shan finding every conceivable flaw in the casket from lack of durability to uncomfortable knots in the padding, and beating Dilsey down, down, down, till she struck what she thought was bottom rock in the original seventeen dollars and ninety-eight cents. When this point was reached, Shan offered to close the trade for twelve dollars, cash. Dilsey held out for her price as long

as she dared, and then named fourteen as the lowest depths to which any woman with self-respect could afford to fall. At this point Shan flung out of the house with the last word, that when she got ready to take twelve dollars for her old clothes-box, she could come and tell him. But he went triumphing, nevertheless. He knew perfectly well that he would be saving money to meet Dilsey's price of fourteen dollars, and he intended fully to do this, if her self-respect should refuse to slump further. In the meantime, he had twelve hours before he would be forced to come to terms with her.

After his sparring match with Dilsey, Shan had taken a circuitous and sheltered ride through the woods, and had brought up at the haunted house with his limbs shaking and his teeth chattering, for the black dark had crept out of its hiding-places and enveloped the face of the hills.

The stranger had met him at the door and the two had gone into the haunted house together, and shut out the rest of the world from them for one long, mysterious hour.

When Shan got home from his secret interview with the stranger, he found that Dilsey and Lil Sellers had beaten him to his abiding-place. Dilsey had come to say that on account of her step-mother's being second cousin to Melissa, and on account of the coffin's being originally bought for her—the step-mother—she would let Shan have it for twelve dollars, though she still thought it no part of a Christian to beat her down like that. In point of fact,

however, Dilsey had come because she couldn't stay away from the settin'-up. And Lil had come because she simply would not submit to being shut up alone at night with what still lurked under the bed.

Dilsey and Shan met in the entry and had it out, after which two kind neighbors were despatched with the wagon to fetch the coffin.

The settin'-up was in full swing. Nearly every family in the valley had furnished at least one representative, and there were present, also, a few more distant neighbors who had come from over the ridge.

Everybody had duly said how "natural" grandma looked—but in God's mercy she didn't—and they had told each other, over and over, that there never would be such another quilt-piecer while the world stood. Grandma's notorious stubbornness had become "firmness," her vindictiveness of tongue, "outspoke honesty," and her lifelong cupidity, a "thrifty savin'ness of nature that ought to be a lesson to ever'body."

When Shan arrived and passed through the big room, the voices of the watchers grew low and reverent, but he paid no heed to his sympathizing friends except to growl out some sort of greeting from under the flapping eaves of his old wool hat. He did not so much as glance at what lay in state in the centre of the apartment, but skulked around it and disappeared into the shed-room immediately in the rear. Here he could hardly pass for the trundle-beds that had been added to the other rude furniture of the

room, brought here to make space in the death-chamber.

A kerosene lamp on a tin rack at the side of the room threw a dim, uncertain light over the faces of the children who filled the beds to overflowing, and who had dropped asleep clasped in each other's arms for mortal terror of the thing that lay between the comp'ny sheets in the big room. Without a glance at the children, Shan went out into the entry and into the other front room in search of Melissa. Here he found her with several other women loading a bedecked table with "nourishment" for the watchers. And he stopped Melissa right in the middle of stacking up custards against the slicing of them, and drew her into the shed-room kitchen for a long, whispered interview.

In the big room, the talk had grown absorbing again. The oldest inhabitant related how grandma done her two twins—them that died—about the flour-sack shirts she had made 'em with the red and blue letters all down the front of 'em—of how, when the twins fought over the one that had the red letters on it, grandma jes nachully took both shirts to the spring an' washed all the letterin' out. She was a smart woman in her mind, and a firm-handed one, grandma was.

There were other inhabitants, not so old, who remembered like it was yesterday what a powerful hand grandma used to be at meetin' before she was took down. Why, she shouted more fervent-like even than Millie Davis herself, though it wouldn't do

to say it to Millie! Then some iconoclast recalled how Beck Logan, ridin' by meetin' one day with Darius Slaton, had remarked, "Ri, ol' Sister Thaggin's done treed the Lord agin, don't you hear her yelpin'?" Everybody was properly horrified at the iconoclast, and some one declared that Beck Logan was a kind-hearted critter but the devil had a mortgage on him, sure!

By eight o'clock, however, the unwonted stir about the house had quieted, and the settin'-up had begun to take on the real settin'-up feeling. The three men who were left, for two had gone for the coffin, had been persuaded by the sisteren to lie down and rest to make ready for their labors the next day. The Thaggins were all tucked away in the shed-room and in the smaller front room where the victuals were spread, leaving the two beds in the death-chamber to accommodate the watchers during alternate naps. On the two beds now lay the menfolks, snoring great heavy, reassuring snores, and leaving the coast delightfully clear for a quiet, gossipy dip by the sisteren. They were gathered about the fire—close together for more reasons than the inclement weather afforded; and they shivered every now and then for the same several reasons. Grandma's dark-brown snuff-bottle was passed ever and anon among them. Aunt Millie Davis had come over very late and was now the centre of the group. Bud, who had escorted her, was among the sleepers.

Bud's version of the rumor about John Marshall and Bud's idea of Mary Elizabeth's part in the drama

had just been given by old Sister Davis, and her listeners were agape; there had been much of Uncle Beck's influence in the story as they had first heard it, but this was more to their taste.

"An' you say she jes handed him that thar place o' Silas's?—Land sakes! Viney, what was that?" It was Dilsey that questioned, and the assembled company demanded in one staccato stage whisper:

"*What!*"

"Sump'n mo-oaned," whimpered the blind Lil, and she pressed closer to her sister's side.

"Pshaw, hit's jes the wind!" exclaimed Aunt Millie, impatient at the interruption of the main theme. "Y' all done got so you air skeered o' the very mention o' that old place!"

"I ain't afeard nor a-skeered," retorted Dilsey, hotly, "I'm jes pestered, for I've done come to the p'int whar I almost b'lieve hit's onlucky to talk about hit.—Aunt Millie, I—I—wisht you'd a-let that sheet stay turned down. Somehow I'd ruther—
see——"

"Thar ain't nothin' under that sheet but what I kivered up with hit, Dilsey."

"Wa-al, that's enough." And they all glanced again at the something that lay covered before them—which, though covered, supported the draping sheet here and there at little points of contact, giving ghastly suggestions out of which the imagination could easily construct the grewsome whole.

But the old woman reverted impatiently to Mary Elizabeth again:

"An' she's done got a notion that she can't eat none o' my victuals," she complained, treasuring against the girl that sin as unpardonable. "She's jes nachully nearly stopped eatin' altogether, an' Babe's takin' on 'bout hit tell I'm plum 'shamed o' him."

"*What's that!*" the assembled company exclaimed again, and with good reason. A long, low wail had risen from somewhere and trembled along the night. And for the space of that wailing, the watchers by the dead were as fixed as gravestones; but a familiar yap at the end of the long, low, horrible sound brought life into them again.

"Ah-h-h—that's Punchus Pilate a-howlin' under the house," explained some one. "That's tne meanest cur dog in the valley, an' nobody but Shan Thaggin would have him skulkin' 'round."

"Hit's a mighty bad sign when they howl 'round dead folks like that," ventured another. "But speakin' o' Ma'y 'Lizabeth—Lord, why don't that dog hush?—did anybody git out o' Melissa what hit was that grandma said 'bout the gal when she was a-dyin'?"

"No, an' they never will. But hit wa'n't nothin' to Ma'y 'Lizabeth's credit, you kin be mighty sure, or Melissa'd a-told hit with her very next breath—she's that crazy 'bout her. Melissa an' Sue were the only ones with grandma at the last, an' only them two knows. Sue started to let hit out this mornin' when I was a-dressin' grandma, but Melissa made her shet her mouth, double quick." It was one of

the nearest neighbors, the one who had reached the scene of interest first, who answered.

"Dyin' people knows," pronounced Aunt Millie with slow, impressive emphasis. The others looked at her and at each other with solemn, slow nods of agreement. Mary Elizabeth's fate was sealed, and sealed by that slight something that lay covered before them.

Old Mrs. Davis suddenly leaned forward in a most confidential attitude:

"I wouldn't have y'all to let hit git back to Babe for the world before hit comes off, but Bud an' Trav Williams have done agreed to turn Ma'y 'Lizabeth outen the school the first o' the month. Thar's jes three trustees in all, Beck Login bein' the third, but his vote don't count ef the other two air ag'in him."

There were exclamations of surprise and approval, but not one note of dissenting, unless, indeed, Pontius Pilate's voice, now borne on the night again, were raised in protest.

"But they've done signed up with her for nine months, ain't they, Aunt Millie?" Viney asked with hesitation.

"The law says they kin turn 'em out *for cause*," the old woman answered firmly.

The weird, ominous howl of the dog rose again. Several looked toward the bed as if they would *have* to wake the sleepers if this thing kept up. But one of the number was just explaining that you can't keep a dog from howling when there's death in the air any more than you can keep a cat from scratching

a corpse, when other sounds from the outer darkness began to mingle with the plaint of Pontius Pilate. At first they were weirdly indistinct sounds and might portend anything. At length, however, they began to gather definite meaning to themselves. And then the sound of horses' hoofs and of wheels became plain enough to the most nervous—and at last, voices. The coffin! It had arrived! The sound of shuffling feet on the porch outside told that something *heavy* was being handled. And now the door was opening, and a long, black something was being lifted in, feet foremost! If the thing had arrived of its own volition it could not have scared them worse!

In a few minutes, however, a fairly normal state of public mind had been established. Two tired, half-frozen men were stamping their benumbed heels on the wide stone hearth, and shaking the sleet from their heavy jeans clothes; while the womenfolk, cheered and reassured by their welcome presence, gave back to allow them the benefit of the fire, and plied them with a volley of questions.

The coffin had been deposited on chairs beside the corpse, and the women had got familiar with it, and were now examining it minutely through their spectacles to judge for themselves the equity of the trade between Dilsey and Shan. Various were the conclusions arrived at, but as Shan was absent and Dilsey right there they all partook of a common bias.

The exception to the rule was, as usual, Aunt Millie Davis. Dilsey had just detailed to them again the ins and outs of the bargain, and explained how, on

account of the coffin's being a sort of tie between herself and Melissa, she could afford to stretch her self-respect to the extent of two dollars more, when Aunt Millie remarked, incisively:

"Wa-al, you know, Dilsey, when all's said, the coffin is second-handed; an' Melissa told me that she told you with her own mouth not to consider *her* feelin's."

Pontius Pilate put in again at this juncture. He seemed to be forcing *his* feelings on their consideration. A shiver ran through the crowd, but Dilsey could not allow even this uncanny interlude to divert her from the last word.

"Wa-al, Melissa's awful high an' mighty about her feelin's lately," she snapped. "She didn't uster give herself no such airs before she got that orgin. I could a-had a orgin, too, I kin tell her, ef I'd a-been willin' to git Uncle Beck to take the wroppers off'n ever' bar o' soap he sold an' save hit for me, lessen the buyer kicked about hit!"

"La, Dilsey, ain't you got th'ough with them soap wroppers an' that orgin yet!" asked another, wearily.

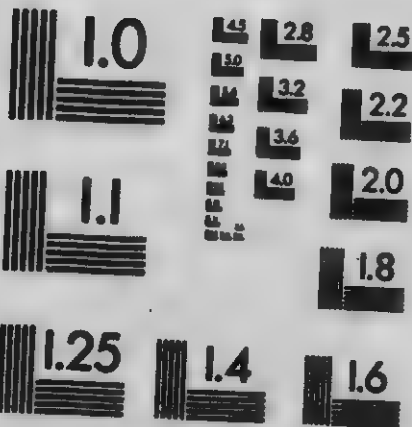
There was something of a suppressed flurry among them when it came to getting grandma into Dilsey's step-mother's coffin, and it looked for a little while as if she were still not ready to relinquish her long-standing opposition to it. But a little coaxing and a little crowding accomplished the work to the satisfaction at least of all who were on the outside, and a general sigh of relief after tension was sent up.

After that somebody suggested that they wake



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up the others and go in and get a "bite o' sump'n t'eat" just to keep up their strength. The suggestion was acted on with alacrity, and the "bite" multiplied itself manyfold under the temptation of Melissa's bountiful supply of soda biscuits and fried chicken and coffee.

Then they returned to the death-chamber again and to the insistent wailing of Pontius Pilate, for he had entrenched himself, so to speak, right under IT! But this was becoming intolerable, and one of the women exclaimed, impatiently:

"Lem, for goodness sakes, go out an' do sump'n to that air dog!"

"What?"

"*Anything!*"

The time came, however, when not even Pontius Pilate's unearthly wail, not the thing that they were watching, could avail to keep open the heavy eyes of the setters-up.

One after another they fell at their posts, and midnight found them sound asleep in their chairs, dead to the terrors that walked the night.

The next thing any of them knew, the morning sunlight was streaming in the unshaded window, and there were sounds of life in the other rooms. Then all had much ado pretending that they had not slept, but had just "rested" and kept quiet for the sake of the Thaggins. And they told each other what light sleepers they were, anyway, and how they had counted the long hours of that awful night. And then the breakfast bell rang.

Melissa Thaggin never told them that she had passed all about among them, nearly two hours before, dressed, and about her day's work. Melissa was a considerate woman, and besides, she had "watched," herself.

After breakfast Mary Elizabeth came over—she had begged a ride on a passing wagon that was coming that way—and asked if she couldn't do something to relieve those who had been watching through the night. Melissa met her in the entry when she came in, and received her cordially; but when she ushered her into the big room, a distinct chill fell upon the group. If Mary Elizabeth noticed the coldness of their greeting, however, she accepted it as one expression of that quiet which is ever the tribute of the living to the dead, and gave it no further thought.

Melissa, anxious to fail naught in hospitality, insisted on having her see how "natural" grandma looked, and uncovered before her the face of the dead woman. But Mary Elizabeth suddenly put up her hand to screen away the sight, and her face was the color of marble as she turned quickly away and walked to the fire. The "watchers," watching now for sure, immediately read something sinister into the occurrence. "She couldn't face grandma," they told each other in whispers, and they recalled to each other that white look of Silas's, and wrote down Mary Elizabeth's exquisite, flawless skin on the tablets of their memories against her. Uncle Beck could have illuminated the latter subject if he had

been there to tell the story of how Mary Elizabeth had flayed herself alive to get rid of her freckles; and the girl herself could have taken whatever there was of the suspicious out of the situation if she had told them that the heart within her was aching because she had let grandina go for days without her cough medicine before she could make up her mind to ask credit at the cross-roads store.

And then the unexpected happened. All unannounced and unheralded, Uncle Beck and Trav Williams came driving up the wood road that skirted the back of the main lot just behind the cow-pen, and pulled up at the back steps, almost before anybody saw them. The excitement was intense. First of all, and outweighing all else, was the feeling that the two men had brought back with them the news of the fate of all that valley; and second—but subconscious, and so, deeply instinctive—was the unaccountable pride in what they had to spring on the returning heroes. It was as if this ever-old, ever-new wonder of Death, this mysteriously elating thing, this thrillingly solemn and important thing, in some way reflected credit on themselves. And, indeed, they showed Uncle Beck and Trav what they had in Dilsey's step-mother's coffin before a single question was asked.

The two men stood for a moment uncovered before what they saw, murmuring the things that have been said under similar circumstances perhaps ever since the very institution of death.

Then Uncle Beck raised his head, and, with a light

in his fine old eyes, said impressively: "Neighbors, hit's all right. John Marshall can't make a lake here big enough to wash his feet in."

Mary Elizabeth was beside the coffin so quickly and so silently that the company gave a distinct start. Her grasp was nervously laid on one of the handles, she was leaning over the dead toward the storekeeper.

"How, Uncle Beck, *how*?" she breathed.

"Why," and, in answering Mary Elizabeth, he addressed the whole breathlessly silent, listening crowd—"why, Shan Thaggin has got titles to this place that air as good as gold, an' tell Shan is willin' to sell his neighbors' an' his friends' chances for the price of one small farm, John Marshall won't be able to flood a foot o' the valley. You see, he'd have to own the whole space flooded, b'cause the law wouldn't allow him to ruin any other man's property."

"How 'bout him gittin' titles to the other lands?" asked one of the more intelligent. "Seems to me we ain't out o' the woods yit."

A shade passed over the old man's face. "Why," he replied, "we don't know 'bout that yit, but expect to hear shortly. But we don't b'lieve a word of hit. You see Trav an' me would a-had to go clean to Montgom'ry to find out 'bout them lands what they say air public lands. An' when we lit on the facts about this here place o' Shan's, Trav's judgment was that that settled the whole matter. You see he reasoned hit thiswise: the only thing that man Marshall could possibly want with any of the lands

was for his reservoy scheme. Ef that was blocked, he'd mighty soon pull up stakes an' go back whar he come from. That's the way Trav put hit down, an' he was satisfied as far as his own interests went. But y'all know how thoughtful Trav is of his neighbors. Wa-al, when I put hit to him how we'd better send or go to Montgom'ry an' find out about them other lands, he agreed at onct, an' put his hand in his own pocket for the advance fees. We got our lawyer to promise to go jes as soon as he could possibly git the time. I was for our goin' on to Montgom'ry, ourselves, but Trav he couldn't see hit that a-way. He 'lowed he could influence Shan, ef influence was needed in a case like this, an' the lawyer could do the rest."

When Uncle Beck finished speaking, his listeners were as silent as the figure in their midst, but every eye was turned on Shan Thaggin, whose face had suddenly grown drawn and pasty. One long, agonizing silence, and then Trav Williams's harsh and grating voice demanded:

"How 'bout hit, Shan?"

"I—I"—the creature almost writhed as he brought it out—"I—I—do-d-done already sold—I d-d-didn't know——"

Mary Elizabeth started back with a smothered cry, and Trav Williams bored his right fist into the palm of the other hand while his eyes narrowed to a hideous line. Except for a horrified, incredulous intake of breath, every other soul in the room stood transfixed. All, that is, except the wife of the man

who held his neighbors in the hollow of his hand. Melissa Thaggin looked her lord and master over, from the crown of his cymlirg-shaped head to the knees that were shaking under him, again, and yet again; and with each look the woman grew visibly taller and straighter. If anybody there had ever doubted which was the better man of the two, he never doubted again after seeing Melissa absolutely blight the father of her children with the fire of her splendid scorn. Having *looked* what she thought of Shan, Melissa turned to the storekeeper.

"Uncle Beck," she asked, in clear and measured tones, "a sale ain't a sale tell the wife's name is signed to hit, is hit?"

All the fire of a quickly revived hope was in Uncle Beck's simple "No, Melissa."

"Then this place ain't sold, an' *hit ain't a-goin' to be sold!*"

In the excitement that was precipitated, Shan Thaggin escaped to the shed-room at the rear and barred himself in against the scorn and reproach of his neighbors, and Mary Elizabeth slipped out to the deserted hearth in the other front room, to have it out with the heart in her breast, which was trying to smother her.

She had destroyed John Marshall's wonderful scheme! She had quenched forever that splendid fire that had been wont to blaze up within him at the very mention of it. She had killed a vital part of him—his ambitions. And when the thought of it all was too cruel to be borne longer, a lesser, but

more pitiable regret welled up again, bringing the tears that had been dried at their fountain-head by that burning other sorrow: She had let grandma go without her medicine!

Then Uncle Beck came in search of her, and found her standing before the fire, blinking vainly to keep back the tears. The old man watched her in silence for a few minutes to be sure of her mood. After a little he crossed over to her and put his arm about her waist:

"What's the matter, honey?" he asked tenderly.

The blue eyes overflowed. "Uncle Beck, I—I—let her go without her cough medicine a long time, just because I hated to ask you to credit me—I—I didn't have any money left"—she was crying on his shoulder now, "and—and I brought it at last, too late!"

"Thar now, honey, don't cry. Hit was all right. I fixed hit myself, for I sont the old sin—the old Christian—a bottle the very day hit give out an' you told her you was busted. Shan was down to the sto' that very evenin', a-quar'lin' 'bout you deceivin' grandma, an' I took in the siterwation an' sont him packin' back with my compliments an' the medicine. I 'lowed that conscience o' yourn would jump on you some day, an' I was layin' for hit."

"Oh, Uncle Beck, you are the best——"

"Go slow, honey, go slow. Shan Thaggin paid for that physic!"

"Why, how?"

"I put twict the price of hit onto the price of a

swingletree he bought that same day. I doubled hit b'cause I knowed he was a-goin' to kick, an' I'd have to leave myself a margin to fall. Shan r'ared, o' course, an' swore he hadn't heerd o' no rise in swingletrees, but I jes laid hit all on Wall Street an' knocked off from the price half of what I had put onto hit—*on account o' hits bein' Shan, an' me bein' so fond o' him.*"

Mary Elizabeth was smiling through her tears. "And how in the world did you come to lay it on Wall Street, Uncle Beck?"

"Why, thar come a long-haired candidate a-speakin' th'ough here last summer, an' he laid ever'thing, from eternal damnation to the boll weevil, on sump'n he called 'Wall Street,' an' he got Shan an' some o' the others tur'ble excited 'bout hit. So, you see, I jes keeps Wall Street up my sleeve tell I need hit." The old man smiled cunningly at his own finesse. "You see, honey," he explained, "hit's my business to beat 'em a-tradin'."

The two sat down by the fire for a talk, and Mary Elizabeth gradually showed the old man everything that was in her heart—everything, except the picture of a strong man's face, hurt to the quick, and the pain it brought her.

But it was not until other subjects were exhausted between them that Mary Elizabeth found heart to ask the question that had been trying to force itself to her lips ever since he entered.

"Uncle Beck, oughtn't you to have gone to Montgomery at once, and not waited on that lawyer?"

The old man took down his spectacles from where they rested on his thin gray hair and adjusted them to his eyes. He leaned toward her now with his shrewd countenance keenly awake.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth," he said, "I was up a tree. Trav wouldn't go, b'cause he said he had to come back an' git his hands on that greased eel, Shan Thaggin, as quick as possible; an' I didn't dare to let Trav git back here to Bud Davis 'thout me bein' here to keep him toned down, so I couldn't go by myself."

"*Uncle Beck*," and the name escaped her like a suppressed cry, "is there—is there danger to—*him*?"

The old man started to say something while yet his face was clouded, and then deliberately stopped, smiled cheerily, and exclaimed:

"Lord he'p that skeered face of you, ain't *I* here, child?"

But Uncle Beck's cheeriness failed to reassure the girl after she had passed from under the beneficence of his comforting smile.

John Marshall was in danger—in danger now of worse than defeat! She knew it, for Uncle Beck had as good as said it. And that was what Babe had meant when he told her that she had made a mistake in telling that story to Bud. Then Bud's evil face came up before her, and following in its wake a troop of evils that had not yet taken shape, and the girl, through her sensitive fear, was face to face with the overshadowing, menacing truth.

John Marshall was in danger and through her, through what she had told! In spite of all their talk

of lawyers, of justice through the courts, in spite of Melissa's splendid self-sacrifice that had seemed to be the final, determining stroke in the contest that was being waged, danger was in the air. Uncle Beck had been afraid to trust Trav Williams and Bud together away from his own influence; and Babe had lately come to be immersed in deep and troubled thought.

There was something impending, something imminent, and she, Mary Elizabeth, had conjured that something into being!

When the darkness came down about her that night it somehow entered into the soul of her, and there was no light anywhere, not even the remembered light of those grave and searching eyes. And in vain seemed all her summoning. The guardian spirit of the better self of her had withdrawn, she knew not where. Why had he wrapped himself away?

Could it be that she had blundered? As between this man who sought to usurp and this race that had usurped, as between the restless, burning, consuming ambitions of the one and the vital traditions of the other, where was the right? Could a system that sacrificed even one—any one—to the good of the many remain the outpost of man's search for justice?

If only the Hearer of Prayer cared!

CHAPTER XXI

THE loose dirt had hardly been shovelled in on grandma before rumor threw discretion to the four winds and went rioting up and down the valley:

The stranger had been defeated—ignominiously defeated, and Melissa Thaggin had told him with her own mouth what she thought of him; Shan Thaggin was—out la! what could you expect of Shan Thaggin? The stranger was going to leave right away and take refuge in England or Memphis or some other remote and obscure hiding-place; he was plumb whipped out and scared to death, and he was glad to get out of it all with a whole skin; important news coming very, very soon from The Lawyer—rumor spoke of him as if there were only one of the species; and enough more of the same tenor to defer for a time the crisis that threatened. Just how far the old storekeeper was responsible for these wild statements only one man in that valley knew.

But Uncle Beck had no easy time of it to hold his neighbors in the path of peace, even after they were satisfied of John Marshall's defeat. The thirst to "be even" with the man who had tried to defraud them was scarcely to be controlled, and a lesser man than the old storekeeper could not have done it.

He was playing for time. That the stranger would fulfil the prophecies he had promulgated about him,

he did not doubt. He would leave, of course, now that Mary Elizabeth had been put straight with her people—and the old man fondly hoped that she had, for there was not in all that valley a man who had the temerity to tell him how Aunt Millie Davis, together with the implacable Bud, was persistently discrediting his estimate of the girl to the people.

He was playing for time for John Marshall to gather himself together and go in peace.

But the stranger at the haunted house made no sign. The general public expected something vivid and startling from him when Melissa Thaggin blocked his ambitious project, but the general public was disappointed. It seemed that he was to continue to keep them in suspense. Instead of disappearing as if the earth had swallowed him up, as was confidently expected, he continued to share the lodging of Whitefaced Silas, and to come and go on his big bay horse as was his wont. About the only change that took place in him was, perhaps, due more to a change in the imagination of the lookers-on than in the man himself. The change in his on-lookers but served to render him more mysterious, more in ghoulish harmony with the place in which he had ensconced himself, and more responsible with it for past misfortunes and for evils yet to come.

They hated him to a man, and they grew more and more restive in face of the increasing mystery that was wrapping him about.

Uncle Beck had assured them that Marshall would leave as soon as he could get himself and his affairs

ready, because, his scheme being defeated, he could have now no reason for staying. But it seemed to be taking the stranger an unconscionable time to get himself and his affairs ready, and there were those who began to regret their promise of peace to Beck Logan.

To Mary Elizabeth, the suspense occasioned by John Marshall's delay in leaving was all but unbearable. She, too, had expected him to go as soon as he was assured of defeat, and his failure to do so unleashed her wildest fears for him. She knew that he despised the people there and chafed under his narrow life among them. Then why didn't he go? What could be keeping the man days and days after Melissa Thaggin had herself pronounced to him her ultimatum? Mary Elizabeth appealed to Babe about it, and Babe promised her to warn Marshall. She went to Uncle Beck with her fears, and asked him if she wouldn't better see Marshall, herself, and beg him to leave; but Uncle Beck lost his temper at her and told her to keep away from the man. She talked to Trav Williams, and to Bud and Aunt Millie, and to Ri Slaton and anybody else who would listen about the good qualities she had found in Marshall, reminding them how close she had been to him and how well she knew him. She pleaded for peace up and down the valley, with what success only the low, insinuating glances exchanged behind her back could rightly index.

The loose dirt had not had time to pack down hard over grandma, nor the country roads to dry,

before Mary Elizabeth's interference between Trav Williams and his coveted rosy-cheeked prey began to bear fruit.

Brought to bay, Melissa Thaggin flatly refused to marry her young daughter to the man; and, harried by her opposers, all unintentionally let out the cause of her change of heart. Mary Elizabeth had advised her not to let this marriage be consummated because Trav Williams was "old, hard, violent, mean," etc., etc. Melissa confessed this to her enraged husband, and the enraged husband communicated it at once to Trav Williams.

But though Melissa was the immediate bar to the fruition of his plans, Trav's wrath descended in full violence on the head of Mary Elizabeth. Melissa had always been in Trav's good graces, and lately she had been set upon a pinnacle in his esteem. It was Melissa who had defeated the hated stranger in his project to bring their valley to ruin, for Melissa had not only refused to sign her name to the transfer of her property for a price that was staggering—they had all heard the details by now—but had remained steadfast in her refusal.

With his hand forced by Melissa, Shan made the best attempt of which he was capable to make his acquiescence in his wife's determination not to sell seem hearty and spontaneous. He had pretended ignorance of the fact that his wife's signature was necessary to make the transfer valid, and explained that he had thought a verbal agreement, made between the stranger and himself just before grand-

ma's death, constituted a bona fide trade. And the neighbors had outwardly accepted his explanation for Melissa's sake.

But all the same, not Trav Williams nor any other soul in that valley believed but that Melissa had to fight their battle over every time she and her husband were alone together. That Shan Thaggin would betray the last interest of the last one of them for a price, not a mother's son of them doubted, so they looked to Melissa as the savior of their earthly interests. The big indefiniteness of the distant Lawyer's performances was too much for most of them, and public interest circled round and round the proposed sale of the Thaggin farm till that came to be, practically, the only question involved.

And so it happened that when Melissa took a stand against Trav Williams in his suit for her daughter, Trav was already so deeply prejudiced in her favor that he simply refused to allow himself to feel hard toward her, and heaped the blame of her opposition on the head of a scape-goat he was only too glad to load with it.

Mary Elizabeth had put a "spell" on Melissa, he told himself, and she had poisoned Sue's mind against him. Logically, Mary Elizabeth would have to be driven out of the neighborhood before his, Trav's, affairs could assume the normal again. So, Beck Logan to the contrary notwithstanding, Mary Elizabeth would have to go. Trav told Bud Davis of the determination at which he had arrived, and Bud agreed heartily. Then they reminded each other that

they two together formed two-thirds of the school board of trustees, and that they could, without the consent of any other, expel the teacher from her position "for cause." They told each other that they had the cause. And they planned together to call a meeting of the school board of trustees at some time when the storekeeper would be unable to attend, and demand the resignation of the teacher by the first of the next month. Then Trav told Bud that it would be his, Bud's, place to see that the girl be not allowed to remain under the protection of her present shelter after their ultimatum should be pronounced. She must be "rooted out," he told Bud, and there were to be no white livers shown in the whole affair. Then the man speaking and the man listening each suddenly bethought him of a certain gaunt, stupid, but dangerously quiet man who might have something to say in the matter, but neither called his name.

The two men thought themselves quite alone when they discussed the matter, for they had sought the back steps of Uncle Beck's store on which to hold conclave; but there was a certain pile of empty boxes near by, and behind it a certain boy who had an inherited habit of slinking, so there were three, and, in the long run, more than three, who knew of the compact.

But there was a stage in the conversation in which the heads of the two men were brought close together and the boy behind the boxes could not, for the life of him, make out what was being said. The name of

Marshall came to him once, distinctly, and his excited apprehension helped him to hear it many times again; but what they were saying about the stranger that would demand such fierce gesticulating, his feeble and overtaxed imagination failed to supply.

With the instinct of an animal to obey the hand that feeds it, Tony Thaggin went straight to the stranger with what he could remember of that whispered dialogue; and what he could remember included all that had been planned about driving the little teacher out of school and out of home. He remembered all that because he loved her and feared for her.

In the meantime, Shan Thaggin was using every possible means to counteract Mary Elizabeth's influence on his daughter, and, inch by inch, Sue's courage gave way before his burning abuse and threatened physical cruelty, till one day, in a fit of hysteria, she screamed out her acquiescence, and the mother was left standing alone in her opposition to the sacrifice of her child.

And this rout of Sue's open opposition proved serious indeed for the mother. As long as Sue would say that she would not marry the man, there was really no way in which she could be forced by her father to do it; but Sue had turned coward, and, with chattering teeth, had promised everything that her father dictated, while in secret she had clung to her mother's skirts, declaring that she would drown herself in the creek below the falls if Melissa did not save her.

Melissa felt the force of Trav Williams, too. Trav had been monarch of all he surveyed for so long that it had become a mental habit with her to concede to him; and now that his terrible will power, backed by his terrible prestige, was deliberately directed against her, she found her position almost untenable.

Of course, everybody in the valley knew of the Williams-Thaggin complication, and discussed it freely. Backwoods folk hold nothing private except the schemes of one against the other.

Uncle Beck at the store heard it, over and over again; but the only time in which he was known to open his mouth on the subject was to send a message to Mary Elizabeth by Babe to the effect that if she didn't stop attending to other people's business for them he was going to "whup" her.

But Uncle Beck's threat availed naught in the face of her growing alarm for the man whose safety she had jeopardized; and, for the time being, every other heartache and every other apprehension seemed swallowed up in the one great fear—she might fail to save him from their hate! Could she hope to make these primitive creatures understand that in defeating John Marshall's great project—yes, somehow, sometime, it had become "great" to her—they were more than even with him—cruelly more than even?

So she talked to Bud and to Trav and to all the rest about him—for him—because she had conjured up this danger that was menacing him.

Why didn't he go? Was he going? He must, and at once. Babe had promised to tell him his danger, but could she depend on the effectiveness of a warning from poor old Babe?

During these days of apprehension, she directed her steps to and from school always along the path that led over the hill by the haunted house and down through the dark-green twilight of the pine forest; she lingered on the way, she haunted the wood places he and she had been wont to frequent together, but no glimpse of the man was vouchsafed to her.

She began to struggle to recall his every familiar look and to wonder what change had been wrought in each by this terrible catastrophe.

How was he surviving his mortification—his despair? How was he bearing what she, Mary Elizabeth, had brought down upon him—this man who was never so intensely awake as when he was dreaming his big dream? How was he faring, now that his dream was shattered? And where, oh God! where was the peace that this triumph was to have brought?

It was in search of the answer to her vain questioning that Mary Elizabeth took her way one Saturday morning, one cruelly bright Saturday morning, to the man whose dream she had broken. She did not allow herself to think of Uncle Beck and his orders. She only knew that she must see John Marshall again. Even his bitter reproaches—or perhaps, his

erable not knowing. She must see him once more, and then she must make him go.

The warm sunshine poured down on her head as if in blessing, but she did not feel its beneficent touch, nor respond to its bright reflection from the yellow dust under her feet. A mocking-bird was singing its heart out in the awakening forest, but she did not hear.

She was going to the haunted house to tell John Marshall—she was going to tell him—what? She had a feeling—a half-remembrance—that she ought not to go the man's place of habitation, but that seemed to her now the only sure way of seeing him, and see him she must.

But she did not get to the haunted house, for the reason that she met John Marshall face to face at the bend of the road just before she reached the summit.

He was coming down the road at a swinging gait, and stopped short to keep from running over her, looming big and strong and aggressive before her, with the look of virile health written all over him.

No, he did not look crushed. He looked only a good deal surprised, and vividly, warmly awake to whatever it was that she had to say to him as she deliberately stopped him on his way. There was no "cold, unspeaking scorn" in the alert, intense—and was it alarmed?—gaze with which he regarded her; and the lips from which she had feared the bitterest reproaches, parted in a kind

"Good-morning."

"I was coming to see you," said the girl, unconscious that she had paled at his sudden appearance.

"*You were!* Why, what's happened?"

Was he scared? She would scarcely have thought it of him. But his face had become instantly grave, his eyes apprehensive. He was watching every change in her face with an intensity that was disturbing. And then—

"Has anybody troubled you?" he surprised her with.

"Why, no, there's nothing to trouble me, particularly; I wasn't thinking of myself."

"Oh," and his face changed again. This time he looked unaccountably relieved, and his relief, like his previous alarm, seemed out of all proportion to the circumstances which had called it forth. Mary Elizabeth was bewildered.

"Can't we go down to the spring?" she at length asked, glancing down a sheltered by-path that seemed to promise seclusion. "We can get a seat on the rocks there. I have something to say to you."

Marshall's glance followed her own, but he said promptly: "It's better here in the sunshine. Sheltered nooks are not very wholesome in the winter. Hold on, and I'll get some pine straw and we can sit right here by the roadside where it's warm and sunny."

As it used to be in the first days of their friendship, he made his way hers; and Mary Elizabeth, with her

heart now in her throat, watched him in silence as he worked. In a short time she was enthroned on a soft brown cushion where she could lean back comfortably against a giant tree-trunk and run her restless little hands constantly over the carpet of brown needles that was spread around.

Marshall disposed himself on a flat lime rock at her feet. He could not take his eyes off her.

If there is any one instinct in women that is absolutely unfailing, it is the instinct to appear as attractive as possible to the men they are trying to break of loving them! Mary Elizabeth had assured herself that she would not marry this man for anything in the world—that she wanted him to forget her. But, she had deliberately donned for this interview the very dress that he liked best. It was a slim, inexpensive affair, but it exactly matched the color of her eyes; and when she slipped down on the dark pine straw and rested her head against the yet richer brown of the great trunk, she looked as if she had been painted into the landscape by an artist who loved his theme.

"You wanted to tell me—?" suggested the man, and his breath came deep and quick.

"I wanted to tell you," said the girl, finding it hard to begin, "I wanted to tell you first that I am sorry——"

A dismaying change swept over his face, and she hastened to explain—"No, no, not that! I'm sorry that I *had* to do it, not sorry that I did it."

The warm, melting flush that had spread over the

man's face receded instantly, leaving the eyes and mouth hard. He looked away from her, and she saw by a certain grim set of his side face that this was to be her reply. Mary Elizabeth could not let it go at this.

"But, but," she continued, uncertain of her ground, "I *am* sorry for what I said to you when you told me about that old house up there. I think I knew even then that you were not dealing dishonestly with me. It was my temper that got the best of me."

She waited a moment in a silence that he made no move to break, and then added: "Of course, I know that you blame me for——"

He turned to her suddenly, slightly pale, but with himself well in hand.

"No, I don't blame you," he said quietly. "You have been mistaken from first to last, but I suppose it's your training that is to blame. You thought that I was all bad and these people here all good—that I was all wrong, and they all right. You thought that the clash between their interests and mine was a clash between sordid commercialism and exalted idealism, when it was only the world-old cutthroat strife for mastery between man and man, with pretty much the same sort of men on both sides. You had the version of the histories and the other story-books—you didn't know how mixed are the good and the bad, the honest and—well—the *unhonest* in the best of us."

The girl shrank visibly, as if the cynicism of his

words and tone had dealt a personal hurt to herself.

"But," she protested, "there is, there must be unalloyed good somewhere. Haven't you ever found it?"

He looked deep into her eyes for a moment and then answered, slowly:

"Only in your heart."

"Don't!"

"I answered your question." The man passed his hand across his forehead, and his fingers shaded slightly the fire that was burning in his eyes.

There was a longer period of silence between them this time, and then the girl began, with the air of one summoning courage for an ordeal:

"Don't make it hard for me to say what I really came to say."

"Why, forgive me. What is it?" he asked.

"I wanted to tell you," she began again, "that in the long, sleepless nights that I have passed since I ruined your project, I—I have somehow come to feel that, after all, maybe it was not just the money in it that mattered to you—that maybe—your big dream was a vital part of yourself, and I had hurt you through it—more than I could know——"

She stopped with the sentence unfinished, for the man had turned quickly away so that she could no longer see a line of his face. He was playing with the pine straw, now, brushing it to and fro with a stick he had picked up. He did not answer.

After a little the girl continued:

"And last night it came to me that now these people would love me and trust me for what I had done for them, and that I could, as time went on, make them love me more and more—if I threw my whole self into doing for them—and that maybe, after a while, I could get them to join you in doing what you had dreamed of so long, and nobody's life tenets would be violated. You see if I stay here and try very, very hard——"

Marshall turned abruptly to her. He had snapped the idle stick in two and flung its fragments from him. The lines that were now fast melting from his face might very recently have meant heartache with bitterness in it, but there was not a vestige of the feeling in his voice as he interrupted her:

"For God's sake, put that out of your mind! That is the very last thing in the world I'd let you do. I'm licked, but I'm not whining, and I sleep like a Christian. And as for your throwing *yourself* into the breach and——"

"Yes, but I could——"

"Yes, but you couldn't, and you *shall not*! Understand me once for all—I don't mean to be harsh with you—but I'm not going to allow you to even attempt such a thing. You must believe me."

Mary Elizabeth started to interrupt, but he stopped her almost peremptorily with: "See here, I know this situation a thousand times better than you do, and I know that these wretches haven't a particle of gratitude toward you. They never have loved you, and they never will; and they have

distrusted you from first to last. The longer you stay here, the more they will hate you. The fact of the business is, you've got to leave here, and you're going before the first of next month."

"Who says so?"

"I say so," commandingly—and then with infinite pleading as the girl's spirit rose—"Mary Elizabeth, if you knew that you had hurt me vitally—hurt me beyond redeeming—wouldn't you do this one thing that I asked of you?"

"And have I hurt you—so much?"

Only the sudden tightening of the lines about his mouth answered her, but it was enough.

"I can't bear it," she sobbed, dropping her face into her hands.

"Oh, don't, please don't," he pleaded; "I never meant to let you know. I—I only saw a weapon that might make you go, and I was coward enough to use it. Little girl, if the ruin of my hopes here could eventuate in taking you out of what surrounds you, I would have nothing to regret. Won't you go? Won't you go?"

"I can't," she said; "don't you see that I can't?" She had stopped crying now, and he compelled her eyes to his own as he insisted:

"But why can't you? It's imperative, I tell you—you must."

"But I promised my guardian to stay here and teach so that these children that are growing up could be lifted out of their ignorance. No, listen to me—he said if that were to be done for one genera-

tion by a person who was really fitted for and consecrated to the work, that that would be doing it for all the generations that would come after."

"But why couldn't the work be done by somebody else?" he demanded.

"Because," answered the girl, maintaining herself against his aggressiveness, "because well-equipped teachers won't come to these districts. If I were to give up the school here, there would be elected to it some poorly equipped native teacher who would only condemn them to continuing ignorance. And I promised to stay. Don't you see how it is?"

"Yes, but—" John Marshall closed his lips on the sudden temptation to tell her that the school was shortly to be taken from her. If he should tell her that, he would have to tell her why, and he believed that she could not bear it. His glance fell apprehensively on her slight, frail form; he noted the transparency of her perfect skin and the shadows under her violet eyes, and he somehow got the notion that the spirit of the girl was frail and flowerlike too, for all her store of passionate temper, and that a breath too rude would snap it.

Tell *that* story to *her*? And he of all persons tell it? It was out of all nature—it couldn't be done. He closed his lips, and told himself again that some other way would be opened, changing his answer to—

"Yes, but faith to a rash promise is madness."

The girl was ready for him:

"There are times when it may look like madness, but it is always *faith*," she said. "Besides, in this

case it most certainly is not madness. Just as *he* said, I can't hope to do much for those that are grown, but the children are in my hands. I can do *everything* for them."

Marshall did not reply, and after a pause that had gradually grown awkward, the girl ventured:

"I have been so puzzled, so astounded by something, and I can't for the life of me make out a reason for it. You came to me deliberately and gave me permission to tell your secret broadcast while the consummation of your scheme yet hung in the balance. You, yourself, put it into my hands to ruin you, when you knew that you could keep me silent as long as you—as long as you were willing to do it. I can't make it out."

She waited a little, but Marshall did not seem disposed to help her over the difficulty. He was looking beyond her now, and a strange little feeling of fear at the idea of how deep the depths of him might be, came over her. But she ventured on, fascinated:

"Why did you do it?" bringing his eyes back to her own by the power of her gaze; "why did you do it?"

"Because I *love* you!"—he blazed out, seizing her slender wrist and tightening his fingers about it till the girl cried out in pain. The next moment he had released her and was saying contritely:

"Forgive me!"

The girl rose quickly to her feet, and he followed her as quickly.

"I—I am sorry I let myself go like that, because I so wanted to influence you. Please don't go yet," he pleaded. "I so wanted to influence you against trying to stay here—to get you to go now—I can get you a place where you will be independent and still be with the right sort of people"—he was promising wildly, and he knew it. "You won't be under any obligation to me at all, and I won't force myself on you against your will anywhere you may go. If you'll only go, and go now——"

"But you know that I *can't* go ;" the girl was looking impatiently down the way that he had blocked to detain her.

"Then when you do go," and a look of pain came into his eyes as he said it—"won't you promise me that when you do go, you will let me help you get a situation somewhere else? Promise me that if you decide to go you will send me word—that you'll call on me as on a friend to help you. Mary Elizabeth, won't you do *this* for me?"

The girl was troubled and bewildered.

"After all that has passed between us," she said, "and knowing as you do how I feel toward you, I don't see how you could expect it—and I don't see why you should care whether I go or stay. I don't see why you should care, after I have—after I have——"

"After you have put yourself beyond my reach? And is that your conception of love? I had thought it out to a different conclusion; and I have a fancy that not in the near future only, but through all the

years to come, I shall care whether you go or stay. Darling!—"

But the girl stopped him with a quick

"Don't!" and then: "I came here to-day to beg you to leave—to beg you to leave for my sake and for your own."

"Why for your sake?"

"I—I am wretched for fear that what I have done may bring about more serious trouble for you. They might—they might—" A sudden pallor said the rest.

"Well, it wouldn't so much matter, now. But don't carry me on your conscience, child, if they do—Oh, I—why, don't take it *that* way! I was only talking idly. There is not the slightest danger to me in the world. Believe me, there isn't."

"Won't you go?"

"On one condition," he answered.

"And that is——?"

"That you go with me. No, wait, you must hear me out this time. I love you—God, how I love you! Only come with me, girl, and I'll go all the way to—*anywhere*! Nothing on earth matters but you. Nothing mattered but you when the test came"—then correcting, quickly, "I mean would matter if the test should come. Don't go, don't. Listen to me: I hold titles to every foot of land in this valley now except Shan Thaggin's farm. The land is mine to do what I will with. I will give to every soul here the land that he thought he owned and didn't, if you will be my wife."

The girl recoiled from him with a face that was now deadly pale.

"The man I go with," she answered, "will do what is right because it is *right*, and not for any lesser reason!"

CHAPTER XXII

BABE DAVIS sat on an old rail fence and looked across the valley. The mists were breaking away now and were trailing their tattered skirts carelessly across the tree-tops, but here and there a thin gray shred of filmy vesture rested over some sheltered nook like a carelessly flung cobweb. Now and again the early morning sunlight struggled through. The air was warm and cold in streaks, and the face of the brown hills showed only half-hearted efforts to turn green again. It was a misty, uncertain morning, gray for the most part, but with here and there a lance of sunshine, and here and there a promise of unfolding.

Babe Davis sat on the old rail fence and looked across the valley. The mists of uncertainty and unknowing were trailing across the unawakened mind of the man, but here and there the light was struggling through. Babe was thinking.

He was perched upon the topmost rail with his long, thin legs drawn up till his knees afforded a convenient resting-place for his elbows. His huge, bony shoulders were hooped over, and his scraggy neck was thrust forward. His lower jaw had dropped slightly, leaving the protruding teeth unprotected. The great, ox-like eyes were pained now, with the unwonted travail of thinking.

What to do? What to do? The mists were trailing low. He would go to his brother and tell him—no—yes—he would go to his brother and tell him that Welchel Dale was *not* the man who had informed on him, and that he therefore had no right to be enemies with Mary Elizabeth. And then Bud would—no, Bud wouldn't, either—and the landscape clouded again. Bud *wouldn't* believe, because—he wouldn't want to. No, Bud *wanted* to believe that Welchel Dale had informed on him. He had probably wanted to, even before that awful night. Bud would be mad to hear that Welchel hadn't sinned against him. Besides, he wouldn't believe it. You see, there was no proof at all to offer him.—The air was coming in chilly streaks now. If he told Bud that John Marshall said so, it would just connect Marshall and Mary Elizabeth still more strongly in Bud's mind. Bud would think something mean and low because Marshall knew about Mary Elizabeth's father. And—and—yes, Bud would get the notion that Mary Elizabeth somehow knew about that terrible night—and, God!—how he would hate her! And Bud would—yes, he would—he would only hate the stranger the more for seeming to know more than he had any business to about things that everybody wanted forgotten. And if Bud thought that John Marshall knew about the fate of Welchel Dale, what dog's chance would there be for the fellow? It was bad enough now, even though that devilish scheme of Marshall's had been brought to nothing. It wasn't fair to let a

fellow like that be shot down—a fellow who was deliberately facing just that for Mary Elizabeth. No matter what he had *tried* to do, he hadn't succeeded, and he was standing up to Mary Elizabeth like a man! No, it would never do to tell Bud. Better let it all drop, now that Marshall had been stopped in his deviltry. But——

Had Marshall been stopped?

Melissa Thaggin had refused to sign the papers that would give the man the right to open the flood gates on them. But could Melissa stand out in face of the odds against her? Did any woman in all the world—even beyond the ridge—ever stand out against her rightful master? Women were mostly good, yes, Melissa was very good. But who ever heard of depending on a woman to keep on siding against her husband? It needed no shaft of light to show Babe that Shan Thaggin was only pretending to be supporting his neighbors against the stranger. Babe's very instinct had told him from the first where Shan's inclination lay. It was Melissa who barred John Marshall's way.

By gad, something would have to be done to change Shan before their homes would be safe! But what?

The light at last! He would go to Thaggin with what he had learned. Yes, he would tower over that miserable cur of an informer and dare him, by the memory of Welchel Dale's fate, to have one other thing to do with John Marshall. Shan Thaggin was the biggest coward that ever was born into

the world. All he, Babe, would have to do would be to tell Shan, up and down to his own face, that he knew him to be the man who had informed on Bud and Trav, and that if he ever dared to let John Marshall have one foot of his land, Trav and Bud should know the whole truth. That would fix it. Shan wouldn't dare to budge with that hanging over him!

Babe Davis was slow to come to conclusions, but prompt to act when he had at last made up his mind.

The flea-bit mule was untethered from the fence by which he grazed, and shortly thereafter Babe drew rein at the cross-roads store, and inquired for Shan Thaggin. Shan was not there. Indeed, the old storekeeper reported, Shan had not herded with his neighbors much of late—he would probably be found at home under Melissa's protection.

Shan was found at home, and when Babe called him to the gate, Melissa followed anxiously in his wake.

This would never do. It was not to say kind-like to let Melissa know how low was the man she had married. He must have it out with Shan alone.

Babe was not good at strategy, but after the profuse howdys were over he made out to say, stumbly:

"Shan, I—I—'lowed I'd come over an' git a little o' that seed corn o' yourn, y'all seem to have sich good luck with your corn—I got sump'n to tell you, private-like." He added the last in what he in-

tended for a whisper, but Melissa's sharp ears caught what he said.

Melissa was a good, honest soul, but the word "honorable" had never yet found a place in her vocabulary. Besides, she had had to live with Shan Thaggin.

"Babe," she said, as innocently as if she had never heard a word in all her life, "Babe, light an' hitch an' come in to the fire. Hit's a tur'ble chilly mornin'. Come in an' set a spell with Shan, while I take a turn in the kitchen."

This seemed an opportunity, and Babe gladly accepted her invitation. In a few minutes the two men were seated comfortably before the fire with a bag of seed corn between them.

Melissa went out and closed the door noisily behind her, and her heavy steps were unusually heavy as she made her way to the kitchen, which was at the back and on the other side of the house. No sooner did she arrive in the kitchen, however, than her steps suddenly became as light as a cat's, and she turned in her tracks and made her way into the shed back of the apartment in which the two men were seated. It was the room in which the children had slept when the settin'-up was held, and it communicated with the one in front. Melissa quickly laid her ear to the crack of the door which separated her from her husband and his guest.

"Shan Thaggin," she heard Babe say, and the use of her husband's last name, together with an abrupt scraping of the floor as if a chair had been

shoved back, sent her heart pounding within her breast—"Shan Thaggin, I'm sorry I couldn't a-spoke to you on the outside, like I 'lowed to do."

"What you mean, Babe, what you doin' that a-way for?"

Melissa could not see through the crack, but she knew by her husband's whining tone how he was shrinking up before what she heard in the other man's voice, and her cheeks flamed.

"To be a-skeered o' *Babe Davis!*" she exclaimed to herself, bitterly, and her fat hands were clinched tight as she listened again.

"I 'lowed to have hit out on the outside, b'cause what I've got to say to you is sump'n you don't want to hear."

"*What?*" her husband's voice replied, waveringly. There was a silence that was terrible to the listening wife; and then, more terrible still, came:

"*You*, Shan Thaggin, air the man what informed on Bud an' Trav 'bout that thar still—an' you let 'em hang Welchel Dale by the neck tell he was dead for hit. You air a murderer, an' worse—you air a *informer!*" Melissa's pounding heart stood still.

"I nurver—neither—I—I—" came in a faint echo of what was once her husband's voice.

"Don't you lie to me! Don't you *lie* to me, Shan Thaggin; I tell you I *know!*"

The wife's heart sent up a voiceless prayer that, the next moment, seemed to be hurled back upon her in mockery.

"Ba—a—be, do—Trav know? Do Bud know?"

Melissa slipped to the floor—*It was true!*

The weight of her heavy body against the door at which she had been listening burst it open, and the mother of Shan Thaggin's children lay, sobbing, across the threshold.

The two men—the one standing, the other cowering in a homespun-covered barrel chair—were struck dumb. Babe Davis, who had been standing very tall, suddenly laid hold of the mantel-shelf, and the fierce, protruding eyes grew dim. The mists were settling down again.

Babe Davis had seen men fight like beasts, and suffer like them. He had known tragedy in her wildest, most primitive undisguise. He had seen all this—and yet had kept his grip. But the sight of a woman, sobbing, was too much for his hardihood. And that woman Melissa! Melissa, who had in the old days always been friendly when other girls laughed at him and ran away! He, Babe, had told Melissa that Shan was an *informant*—Shan, the man she had lived with all these years as wife!

Babe Davis tried to speak. He tried to say something, but he forgot what it was. Besides, his throat was dry and throbbing. He had a miserable feeling that he had not said what he had come to say, but he couldn't remember now what it was. So he ended by drawing his coat-sleeve across his mist-dimmed eyes, and stumbling out of the house with the feeling that he had blundered fearfully.

Inside the room he had quitted, the clock on the little mantel-shelf ticked its very loudest as if to make up for the dead silence which reigned between

the semblance of a man that crouched beneath it and the woman who lay prone on the floor with her eyes covered as against the thing she was brought to face. One, two, three minutes were ticked off with a fateful evenness of stroke, and then the cowering figure in the homespun-covered chair cowered closer still, for the woman was struggling slowly to her feet, she was approaching to confront him!

"*Well!*" was all she said to him.

"Melissa, Me-lis-sa," he chattered, looking everywhere but into her eyes, "Melissa, I—I—'clar 'fore God I never got no money for hit—I—I—leastways that deputy nurver give me nothin' like 'twas wuth—I—I—" His teeth chattered away after his voice had ceased. The woman stood looking him through.

"An' you let 'em hang Welchel Dale for hit!"

"Why—why—why, Melissa, wouldn't you druther they'd a-hung Dale than me? Would you a-had me die for a man what was most a rank stranger to you, an' me your own husband, too!"

"*Shut up!*"

The cringing wretch dodged and whimpered, but after a few moments burst out:

"Melissa, Melissa, air you goin' to let 'em hang me, too?" He was clutching her skirts now, in a wild fear.

The wife's face grew white as his own. The instinct of the woman of the hills is to go all the lengths for the man to whom she is mated. She knows no other law.

"In the name o' God," she cried out in her agony, "how kin I he'p hit, now!"

"Oh, Melissa, ef you'll jes make Sue marry Trav, hit'll be all right. Trav'll let me alone then, an' what Trav does, Bud Davis does, too. Melissa, please, *please*—for God's sake, Melissa—you don't want po' me hung, do you—please—" His teeth went chattering the rest.

With a face of chalk, but with eyes on fire the woman looked him over.

"Shan Thaggin," she said, and her voice shook, "Shan Thaggin, before Sue should marry a man that was low down and mean, I'd take her down yonder to the creek an' drown her with my own two hands. Do you hear that? I know what hit is—God he'p me, I know what hit is to bear childern to a coward an' a liar an' a brute, but Sue sha'n't, Sue sha'n't, Sue sha'n't." The woman was striking her hands together till they hurt.

The husband shivered afresh at every stroke of her hands together; he made as though to grasp her skirts again in his frenzy, but the woman warned him off with a fierce gesture.

"Melissa! They'll be down on me to-night with the dark—he'p me!" he cried.

In spite of her contempt of him, his appeal struck her through again, for the instinct of the woman of the hills was hers.

"Ef—ef—" she faltered, "ef you could take to the woods——"

"They'd run me down, they'd run me down!" he wailed.

"Couldn't you git a good start of 'em, I'd like to know!" she flamed.

"But I'm afeard o' the woods, Melissa—Welchel—Da-da-le—the night I went to Silas's—oh, I'm afeard o' the woods!"

"You're afeard o' Welchel Dale, an' with good cause. God knows, I'd ha'nt you too!"

"Melissa, ef, ef I might hide somewhar—ef you could let me down in the well tell night! Oh, Melissa, ef you only would, an' go to Marshall an' sign them papers to git us the money, we could slip away to-night an' ketch the train an' go thousands upon top o' thousands o' miles away. All of us together—Melissa, won't you!"

"Hush, Shan, hush—an'—let me think."

The woman turned away from his whining and went over to the window. She stood for a long time in silence looking out at nothing, and facing the choice that she had to make. After a while, however, her wide gaze became gradually focussed. What she saw was the stout lateral limb of a tree near by, that swayed in the rising wind for all the world as if something heavy were suspended from it. It groaned and creaked with the swaying.

"Quick, Shan! To the well!" she cried, as she staggered toward him.

Late that afternoon, something else momentous happened. The stranger tenant of the haunted house walked into the cross-roads store, and, taking a sweeping survey of the loungers assembled, asked if either Trav Williams or Bud Davis were among their number.

A bomb exploded in their midst could not have

created more astonishment. It was not that they feared—though, indeed, there was that in the keen eyes of this virile-looking six-footer that spelled trouble. It was rather unmixed astonishment that made them give way before his aggressive assurance.

Somehow, he didn't look the part of a man who was "plumb whipped out and scared to death," ready to take refuge in whatever remote and obscure hiding-place would afford him shelter, as rumor had described him. He rather appeared dangerously muscular and well-fed as to the physical, and temperamentally ready for trouble as he stood his full height among them and inquired for the two men of all others he was supposed to wish least to encounter.

But the answer to his question was not tardy in coming. A great, brutal, black-looking man came forward promptly, saying:

"I'm Trav Williams. Have you got anything to say to *me*?"

"A little, but to the point," the stranger answered. "Where's Davis?"

"Come here, Bud, ain't nobody goin' to bite you!" It was Trav Williams who called, and in answer Bud Davis came out from somewhere in the rear of the crowd, muttering as he came. Suddenly, but quietly and, it seemed, all unintentionally, the store-keeper got mixed up with the group that had now been given the centre of the stage. It seemed that the old man's near-sighted curiosity made it necessary for him to obtrude himself almost between the stranger who had entered and the men for whom

he was inquiring. So imminent was the old fellow's intrusion, in fact, that the stranger unconsciously put out his hand as if to bar him from coming between.

"I haven't come here to make trouble, Mr. Logan," he said, incisively, "I've come to save these two men trouble in the future." This sounded interesting, and the crowd closed in. Marshall addressed his next remarks to the assemblage rather than to Williams and Davis.

"To begin with," he said, "I want to say to you all, that this talk against the character of Miss Dale is an unmitigated, damnable lie, from first to last, and that it's time for it to stop. You men who have women at home to protect—I'm speaking to you." The shot went home—the word "chivalry" had never been spoken in that presence; nevertheless, the men of the hills stood up straighter and looked at the intruder with glances that were beginning to clarify.

"It seems that I have laid the girl liable to criticism by being too much with her," Marshall continued. "The mistake was mine, but it was a natural mistake. I was in love with her and wanted to marry her. I naturally went with her as much as I could. When my interest and your interests clashed, she sacrificed me without hesitation for your sakes. This is the truth, and it will prevail here among men who are men right. As for *you*," and he turned on the men he had summoned with a savagery that struck quiet the whole company, "what I've got to say to you is

that if you carry out what you have planned together, secretly, against Mary Elizabeth Dale, I'll kill you on sight and as soon as I can get to you."

With the quickness of a panther, the black-browed native reached for his rifle which lay on the counter, but a boyish-looking young fellow snatched it and suddenly presented the muzzle of it to the owner's face. Trav Williams stood petrified, looking into the shining eyes of the boy along the shining rifle barrel.

"Jim Blakey, did you l'arn *that* at school?" one of the astonished on-lookers exclaimed.

"No, by God!" shrieked the excited boy, "but ef he's been a-schemin' ag'ins' teacher, *I'm* goin' to know what he's up to. Say on, stranger, what's he an' Bud Davis been a-doin'?"

"Jimmy, boy, put down that thar gun—hit might go off an' hurt somebody." But the old store-keeper's remonstrating hand was promptly shaken off his arm.

"I'm not a 'boy,'" the youngster blazed, "I'm a *man*! Stand back, I tell you, ever' one of you! What about teacher, mister?"

"Young man," said Marshall to the raging boy—and the tone which he used to him and the look which he gave him conferred the degree of Manhood on the young fellow as surely as a solemn rite might have done—"young man, I'm much obliged to you for keeping me from being picked off before I have had my say out. I appreciate it very much, but I'd rather you'd put that down—won't you?—I ask it

as a favor. No, a little farther off, over there behind the counter—thank you."

When Marshall turned again to Trav Williams it was with the distinct feeling that more than Jimmy Blakey wanted to hear what he had to say to the two silent but infuriated men before him.

"What do you know 'bout me an' Trav?" Bud Davis challenged over Williams's shoulder.

"I know," said Marshall, looking not at Bud but straight into the eyes of the man who would have shot him, "I know that you two sat out yonder on those back steps and planned together to hold a meeting of the school board *without* Mr. Logan here and turn the teacher out of her position, disgraced. I know that you, Williams, said that you were going to run her out of the neighborhood because she was influencing Mrs. Thaggin against letting that fourteen-year-old child of hers marry you. I know that you, Davis, promised to drive the teacher from your mother's roof in order to help this man in his scheme against her. I know that you planned together to keep this to yourselves till you had succeeded, because you knew that the men of this community who put you on their school board and gave you this power would not stand for anything so dastardly!"

With the roar of a wild beast, Trav Williams sprang at the throat of his accuser, but before he could fasten his claw-like fingers on their coveted prey, a half-dozen men had seized him and borne him back till he was pinned against the counter.

They were not assailing, they were merely detaining, inquiring—they wanted to know.

But Marshall flung off his coat and waved the crowd back.

"Turn him loose!" he cried to the men who were holding the purple-faced Trav, "turn him loose!"

"Don't do hit, boys, don't do hit," advised the store-keeper, adjusting his spectacles carefully and looking the two angry men over critically. "This here stranger feller is too well-meanin' t'ward our little hill gal to let him be et alive."

"Let him go," urged the stranger. "One of us has got to lick the other, sooner or later. Get out of the way there! All I ask is a fair fight!"

But the men who were interfering were not ready for a fight till Trav had answered for himself the stranger's charge against him, for there had been that in Marshall's fearless statement and in his manly defence of the girl that carried conviction home to them. They were a crude race, but a fair and fearless one, and they wanted to hear this thing out to the end.

But Marshall, cheated of his chance, was all the madder, and, seeing Bud Davis edging away along the counter, turned on him savagely:

"*You!* What are you going to do about it?—Nobody's holding you!"

Bud jumped violently, and then hastened to protest:

"Hit ain't true, thar ain't a word of hit true! Me an' Trav ain't never said a word about no sich a-thing——"

"You're a liar, we *did* say hit!" roared the panting Trav. "Who's here to be skeered of, I'd like to know?"

An ominous growl ran through the assemblage, and then the old store-keeper was speaking again—a little hastily this time:

"Boys, boys! Hit's all come about th'ough a mistake—a perfec'y nachul mistake. Trav an' Bud may a-been shootin' off their jaw a little wild-like, but that ain't enough to set neighbor ag'in neighbor. A mistake's a mistake——"

"Whose mistake, Uncle Leck?" one of the men who still held a grip on Trav Williams, inquired.

"Why," replied the old man, looking from Trav to Bud and back again with a grimness in his erstwhile kind old face that took Marshall aback, "why, hit's Trav's an' Bud's mistake—I'm two-thirds of that thar school board!"

"Mr. Williams! Mr. Williams! Billy's done been bit by a rattlesnake!" Some one came crying across the open, and the next moment one of the younger Thaggins dashed into the store with a repetition of the wild news.

In an instant the crowd was thrown into confusion. The father, released now, rushed from the store, followed by every man in it, including John Marshall.

It was the work of a few minutes only to bandage the little fellow's leg above the wound, and then the father sprang on his horse, and, taking the injured child in his arms, started on a mad ride to the country doctor. As Trav dashed out of sight, and the

sympathetic crowd turned their faces toward the store again, it was noticeable that Bud Davis and Bud Davis's horse were missing.

"Went to help Trav, mebbe," was the store-keeper's comment.

On the steps he stopped Marshall—the others had already gone in.

"Stranger," he said, and Marshall noticed for the first time, and with a queer little pang at the discovery, that he was an old man—"stranger, hit's proned into me that you'd better be movin' on an' leave us to talk this matter over without you."

"If you say so—all right. But tell those two men for me that I mean exactly what I said—I'm going to kill the first one of them that moves against Mary Elizabeth.—And wait a minute," crowding a green-back into the store-keeper's hand, "give this to Jimmy Blakey for me, won't you?"

Early the next morning, two covered mule-wagons came creaking into the camp, and slowed up in a cleared space where a group of men stood discussing the work projected for the day, and listening for the sound of the breakfast bell. But the not unusual occurrence of the arrival of country wagons among them excited little more than passing glances from the men; and they stood talking together till the two vehicles, suddenly halted before them, burst into bloom as it were with the tawny heads of a dozen or more children. Out front, out behind, and all down the sides where convenient rents in the can-

vas covers afforded peepholes, startled-looking faces appeared in curious, scared wonder.

"Look, Dearing," laughed one of the now interested group. "How's that for a study?"

"Holy smoke!" called another, "are you an orphan asylum on wheels? Or have you got something packed away there in the shape of two or three pairs of parents?"

"Make it four or five pairs, Doc; you always did expect too much of people."

The red-cheeked girl who was driving the lead wagon grew redder-cheeked still, and the lop-sided boy who held the lines over the second pair of mules slunk further to one side and hung his head at the challenge.

It was Fred Dearing who left the laughing company and came up to the lead wagon, saying kindly:

"Can we do anything for you?"

As he spoke, a ruddy-faced, rotund woman brushed aside a bunch of curious children and peered out the front of the wagon.

"Do air one o' you-uns know whar Mr. Horton's at?" she inquired loud enough for all to hear.

"*Camped off his trail!*" howled one very young fellow.

"Horton!"

"Horton!!"

"*Horton!*"

The large bottle-nosed man who shoved his way through their midst paid no more attention to their

gibes than if they had been so many flies buzzing about his ears.

"I'm Mr. Horton, ma'am; what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Marshall's done wrote you a letter an' told me to give hit to you," came the unexpected reply, and she handed the letter to the man to whom it was addressed.

Instantly the badinage ceased. Fred Dearing was not the only man there who entertained grave fears for the situation in the hills. They closed around the recipient of the letter, curious to hear the news; but their grave faces lighted appreciably as Horton, recognizing their uneasiness intuitively, read aloud:

"Feed this bunch and see them on the seven o'clock local. You'd better get some of the boys to help you, as none of them, except the man, has ever seen a train, and you may have trouble. Please treat them kindly, and do what you can to reassure them. Hold wagons and teams. Oblige, Marshall."

"'Man?' where in the mischief is the man?" asked one; but as none of the new-comers replied, and as no man appeared, they soon forgot the reference, and fell to wondering among themselves if it could be possible that John Marshall had clinched his project at last and had forthwith set about transporting the natives. Fred Dearing stood apart with a serious countenance, while Horton gave orders that the hillites be served with breakfast in a double-

quick, and detailed a negro to flag the southbound train.

When a steaming breakfast was spread for them on a convenient lumber pile, the large woman and a most unlucky number of children descended from the wagons and fell to; but still no man appeared. The men, who were still standing around in the hope of learning something of Marshall, peered into the deserted wagons or did what they could to try to get something out of the feeding herd by means of searching questions. But the children never ventured beyond "I dunno," in answer, and the woman maintained a discreet silence, or replied deferentially but most unsatisfactorily.

"Why don't you go to your breakfast?" It was Dearing who asked the sudden question, and the lop-sided driver of the second wagon, whom he had discovered sidling up to him, gave a violent start and made off to the lumber pile as if he expected a stone to follow him.

"Do you know," said Dearing to the man who stood nearest, "if that boy wasn't greener than grass, I'd suspect him of trying to pick my pocket. Do you suppose he could possibly have been up to anything like that?"

In spite of the fact that a number of "the boys" volunteered to help get John's bunch safe on board the seven o'clock local, Horton did have trouble in the end. In the surprise occasioned by seeing the hay at the bottom of one of the wagons rise up and deliver itself of a man after the train had blown in

acknowledgment of the flagging, and the flurry of getting the screaming half-dozen youngest on board the train, something went wrong after all.

The train had scarcely steamed out of sight, and the men turned their faces toward their delayed morning meal, when something broke out of the bushes and running, sidling after them, came close up to Fred Dearing.

"Stand off!" exclaimed Dearing, with sudden repugnance, and the boy shied with a dodge.

He had got left. His name was "Tony." That much their hurried questions developed and nothing more, for the boy seemed little above an idiot. A man had to be despatched to the nearest telegraph station to wire reassurances to the parents of the child.

At breakfast that morning, Dearing had the annoyance of discovering the boy Tony crawling up behind him on the grass. He drove the creature off peremptorily, and finally as he hoped; for he had conceived an antipathy for this apparently half-witted thing that seemed to be so mysteriously drawn to him—but all to no good.

Time and again all during that day he would find the boy unaccountably near him. Threats availed only momentarily; bribes were eagerly grasped, but their terms promptly disregarded. The child had conceived an idiotic fondness for him, Dearing decided, but he simply *could not* have him around.

As he laid his head on his pillow that night, it was

with genuine relief that Dearing remembered the seven o'clock local which, next morning, was to bear the unfortunate child to his parents.

But relief did not bring sleep. Dearing was troubled. It looked ominous that these people should be moving away. Did it mean that John had succeeded in that scheme of his? And if it did, was he, Dearing, glad or sorry? It was wrong, very wrong—it ought not to succeed—he hoped it wouldn't. But John——

Suddenly Dearing sat upright on his cot. What was that? Surely he couldn't be getting nervous! But he could have sworn that he saw the opposite edge of the tent lifted a little. The flap door was fastened back, admitting the light of the dying camp-fire. Any one who chose to enter could have free access through that opening; why should any one choose to tamper with the side canvas?

But—yes, there it was again, lifted higher this time to admit something—something that crept and crawled and writhed close to the carpet of grass. Dearing sat very still in the shadow and watched the figure wriggle in. It was coming toward him; it was very near to him.

In a flash he laid a strong hand on the back of its neck and dragged it the rest of the way.

"You little varmint!" he exclaimed. "What do you want? Speak out!"

But the boy was too frightened to speak. He fairly clung to the ground with all the length of him, and whimpered piteously.

Dearing relaxed his grasp until it was fairly merciful.

"What do you want?" he asked again, and his tone was almost patient. "Haven't you ever learned to talk?"

"I—I—" the creature was speaking at last, but its voice was little more than a breath, so frightened was it, "I—got—sump'n to tell you!" it said.

"*What!*" Dearing caught his breath with the monosyllable.

"Ef, ef you don't git him 'way from thar *quick*, they'll kill him!"

"Kill who? *Marshall?*"

"Uh-huh."

"When?"

"I dunno."

"Who?"

"I dunno."

"But do you know that he is in danger *now?*"

"Ye-ye-yes, mister."

"Are you *sure?*"

"Dead sure. Make him come away quick, *quick.*"

"God! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I tried to—but you wouldn't let me git clost 'nough—an'—an'—I was 'feard for the rest to hear. They might tell on me."

"Nobody is going to tell on you, Tony; we're all your friends," but all the same he kept his hold on the boy and carried him along as he rushed to the tent door and shouted:

"Boys! Boys, come here!"

Again and yet again his voice rang out over the sleeping camp, and something which it carried startled every man to his feet.

"How did you come to pick me out to tell?" Dearing asked, the moment he heard the camp spring to life.

"I heerd the men call you what Mr. Marshall called you when he told *her* how he loved you."

Dearing looked toward the distant hills—John was there—in danger—*John!*

CHAPTER XXIII

It was early Sunday morning, but the Davis family had already breakfasted, and Mary Elizabeth now stood on the end of the front porch and looked along the distance over which her vision could not carry, toward the Thaggin home. Last night, late, she had stood just here with her eyes and heart turned toward Melissa Thaggin. This morning the first thing, she had thought of Melissa, and now, she was here again with all her thoughts reaching out to her.

Then, as if drawn by a magnet, the girl stepped from the low porch, and hurried along the path where her thoughts led the way.

Melissa Thaggin knew that it was sin for a girl to marry a man who was sinful—Melissa knew because she, Mary Elizabeth, had told her so. Now, she wanted Melissa to say back to her just how wrong it was—she wanted that brave, good woman to repeat it to *her*. The time had come when she had to have a woman's heart to lean upon, and she was going to Melissa.

The way was long, longer through its dull familiarity, but the girl did not slacken her pace till she reached the bars that divided the Thaggin premises from the woods. It was then she discovered that

her skirts were wet to the knees with the heavy morning dew and discolored with the stains of grass and weeds. With only a passing impatience at her own lack of care, she entered the field that occupied what would have been the front lawn in another state of civilization.

The bars were down—it was unlike Mrs. Thaggin to allow such carelessness. Mary Elizabeth stopped and carefully put them up again, sliding each bar into its socket. Then she turned toward the house and took her way along the foot-path that led through the springing corn.

Where were the children? And where—where—? Mary Elizabeth stopped still. It was all so quiet, so deserted!

Then she walked slowly forward, looking to right and to left and again at the silent house. Hogs were in the field across to the left, rooting up the young corn; the garden gate was open and cows were battenning on the early vegetables. Not at door nor window, not from under the house nor from any one of the various crannies about the place, peered a single tawny-haired urchin.

The front door had dropped ajar and the expressionless windows stared blankly into the unseen. It was as if the spirit had departed in panic, leaving this, the shell, agape but dumb at the tragedy of the leave-taking.

Mary Elizabeth hurried to the open door, and the sound of her own footsteps in the entry, augmented by the all-pervading quiet, startled her at first into

looking back apprehensively. On tip-toe now, she pushed the door wide open, and stood bewildered before the confusion there displayed.

The room was in chaos. Drawers had been turned out, rifled, and left empty on the floor; boxes, dragged from somewhere, had been pillaged of their contents and left to block the way; the little pine bedsteads in the corners were 'stripped of their dignities' and were hiding under the rubbish piled upon them; the barrel chair beside the black and yawning fireplace no longer interposed a padded homespun covering between itself and the critical world.

A pair of worn-out, mud-clotted, run-down shoes lay right in the girl's path as she advanced, and she stopped as at the hest of a familiar voice. Yes, they were Tony's. Anybody could have told that, for they looked just like the boy. Something tightened in her throat as she bent over them for a moment. Poor shambling, unguided feet! What of the way they would take?

Aghast, confounded, Mary Elizabeth hurried to the other apartments—to the shed-room, back to the front room across the entry, to the kitchen in the rear of this, and then back to the big room again. Everywhere was chaos, and everywhere that frightening, inexplicable quiet.

And then the truth dawned on her: The Thaggins had sold out to John Marshall, and had decamped in the night-time!

And almost as the thought seized her she spied a

folded paper tacked to the mantel-shelf. It was the work of a minute to unfasten and unfold its one page. It said simply:

"Tell May lizabeth I jes *had* to sell. Merlissa."

A change came upon the girl as she read. She stood up very straight, the delicate mouth hardened, the violet eyes turned black.

Turning quickly, she ran down the back steps and out to the lot. The mules were gone and so were the wagons. But Shan's pony was there in his stall. With mouth still cruelly tight and with eyes blazing, the girl snatched down a bridle from the wall, forced the bit into the pony's mouth, and buckled the bridle securely. Then she looked all about, but no saddle could she see.

Nothing daunted, she led the pony out to the horse-block and mounted him bareback. An overhanging elm limb gave her a good stout switch, and she presently rode out of the back gate and down the wood-road at an unsafe speed. Shan's pony was a good traveller, and hardly needed the encouragement of the whip, but the rider who sat him now had something to take out on somebody, and her mount was nearest at hand.

Down the wood-road she sped, skirting at a wild pace the Golgotha where slept the conquerors of the wilderness, and scarcely tightening rein past the isolated grave of the man whose patience had been tried once too often. Up the west ridge she urged her steed, then over the mountain crest and down the other side past a little tumbled-down, deserted log

cabin that was clinging to and subsiding against the gray, crumbling rocks of the hillside. Mary Elizabeth turned her face away from this home of broken promises as she rode, but the heaven-tree shoots and pokeberry bushes tore at her skirts as she passed.

It was a very white but very spirited-looking girl who slipped off the pony at the door of the old storekeeper's hermit home.

Uncle Beck was sitting just inside the door of his cabin, reading something that looked suspiciously like the Bible, when the light of the open door was suddenly dimmed, and he looked up to behold what seemed at the first glance, the ghost of a girl.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth! Why, child, why, gal! Come in, honey, an' set right down thar in that rockin'-cheer. You look plum tuckered out."

But Mary Elizabeth did not sit down. She came in and stood before the old man with her hands clasped tight before her and her haunting eyes on his own.

"Uncle Beck," she said, "I'm . . . *sperate!*"

The old man lowered the spectacles he had pushed back, and regarded her through them, critically.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth," he answered incisively, "you ain't never took that dost o' calomel."

The next minute, however, he was on his feet with his old hands tenderly grasping her arms, for a look had passed over the face of the girl that put joking out of the question, and shook even his steady philosopher's nerve.

"Set down thar, honey, in that good easy cheer,"

he urged, "an' tell your Uncle Beck what's pesterin' you. Set down like I tell you, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, you look so white an' tiredlike." And then, in exasperation—"Set down *this minute, miss!* La, you done got so you won't mind tell a body hollers at you!"

When he had carried his point, he took his seat opposite the girl across the little centre-table, and said firmly, but gently:

"Now, le's have hit. What's to pay?"

"We are ruined—sold out! We—" Her eyes, black in their intensity, said the rest.

"Say that ag'in." The old man had become very quiet.

"Melissa Thaggin has betrayed us! They have sold out to that man, and disappeared."

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth—you—don't mean—*that*."

"I have been there this morning. The place was literally torn to pieces, and they were gone. I found this pinned on the mantel."

The old man took the note she handed him and read it again and again. Then he folded and folded it till it was little more than a slip.

"Hit looks black—hit looks black!"—the sunshine had gone out of his cheery face, now. "Sump'n's got to be done!"

"What?" demanded the girl.

"What? 'what?'" echoed the old man as if himself in hopeless search of the answer. "Why, we've got to block him at another turn. We've got to—I'm a-goin' to start to Montgom'ry to-morrow evenin'!

—I'm a-goin' to telegraph that lawyer feller to meet me thar. But——"

"But what?" demanded the girl again.

"But I'll have to leave Trav behind this time, I'll never be able to fool him twict. Lord, ef somebody would only cripple him tell I git back!"

"Uncle Beck!"

"Wa-al?"

"That man told me days ago that he had secured titles to every foot of land in the valley except the Thaggin farm!"

A groan escaped her listener in spite of himself, and his withered face was ashen and drawn as he ran his knotted fingers through and through his thin gray hair and stared out at the pale sunshine.

"Hit ain't true, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, hit can't be true! An' yet——"

"And yet?" she echoed, her breath coming short with suspense.

"An' yet," continued the man, and he might have been pronouncing a death sentence as he said it, so solemn was his tone—"an' yet, hit may be. Hit may be! Ma'y 'Lizbeth, years an' years ago, somebody told me that thar was a lot o' gov'ment land hereabouts, an' I'd better look to my titles. I looked, an' shore 'nough, I found that I had to sign up several papers an' pay out a couple o' fees to git this here little place firm rooted to the spot. I warned the others 'bout hit then—the old folks what's mostly dead an' gone—but none of 'em wouldn't listen to me. They was mostly 'feard o' signin'

papers, an' them that wa'n't, balked at the fees. Some of 'em 'lowed they'd tear the gov'ment up by the roots before they would pay for what was already theirs. Wa-al, I done what the man at the land orfice said do, an' nailed my little corn-patch to the map. Lord, but I wisht hit was over thar in the valley whar hit could he'p 'em out!"

"But, Uncle Beck," cried the girl, twisting her hands in her impatience, "wouldn't you better go to Montgomery, anyhow? There might be some chance—I'll help with the expense of the trip. *Please go!*"

A touch of pathos stole into the old man's troubled look, and then he said, tenderly:

"Yes, Blossom, I'll go—me an' you air so rich!"—And then, with a bitterness foreign to him—"Me an' you an' Shan Thaggin!"

The girl struck her little hands on the table between with a force that hurt.

"That's the thing that I can't forgive in fate, Uncle Beck. Here is that creature who has slunk and cringed and ducked and lied—he has gone scot-free with no loss, no punishment!"

"Shan's stren'th was in his pliability, Ma'y 'Lizbeth. Hit's them that won't bend that gits broke."

"And Shan Thaggin is a rich man to-day!"

"Shan Thaggin ain't no man a-tall, honey."

The girl looked at him as if for the first time during the interview. His eyes were grave and quiet, and there was in the depth of them the look that belonged to a blessed memory.

"You," she said, "you believe that way too—that character is all in all?"

"That's about hit, honey."

"Then," and her eyes blazed again, "then sin against character is the unpardonable!"

"What you talkin' 'bout, Ma'y 'Lizbeth?"

"About that man Marshall and the price that he paid for Melissa Thaggin's soul!"

"Poor Melissa!"

Mary Elizabeth was on her feet in an instant.

"You say that!—*that* about a woman who could sell her own people for a price! A woman who would barter the very soul of her for that man's money——"

"Go slow, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, go slow!"

"I *won't* go slow—hasn't she sold that whole valley there?"

"Mebbe, but you don't know what's behind."

"I do know what's behind, John Marshall's money was behind!—No, I won't sit down, either; let me alone, Uncle Beck!—Oh, don't you *see* what it means? It's not just that miserable little farm that has been surrendered—Melissa has traded her integrity, her high ideals of duty."

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth," said he, and his voice sounded old and tired as he said it, "when you git to be sixty-nine you'll find out that people with 'high ideals' of duty air sometimes in much the same fix as the feller that's walkin' 'round on stilts—they're high up in the landscape all right, but shaky on their legs, an' they air liable to git their props knocked from under 'em by the first feller that has his feet planted solid on the earth."

The girl was facing him with head up and eyes flashing with indignation.

"I'm not going to talk to *you*," she exclaimed bitterly; "I'm going to talk to *Bud Davis*!"

The old man rose promptly and pushed back his chair.

"No, you ain't, neither," he replied firmly. "You ain't a-goin' to Bud Davis in no sich a reckless fit. Look a-here. Ma'y 'Lizbeth, the responsibility for these here people ain't all yourn. Git that into your head, ef you kin. There's been a Saviour of souls, but th'ough all time, hit's been ever' man's individual business to take keer of his own hide.—No—stop. Ef you've got to be the one to carry this here firebrand on, go to Babe with hit."

"*Babe*!—I can't even depend on Babe any longer. Why, he once actually tried to get me not to say anything against that man—and that, when he knew that he was slowly choking the people into loosening their grasp on what was their own! You'll be telling me that there is 'something behind' Babe, next."

"Yes, an' you're a-thinkin' right this minute that thar's 'sump'n behind' with me too, you little spit-fire, but you dassen't say hit!"

The girl looked at him steadily for a minute and then turned to the door, but the old man laid a firm grasp on her wrist and stopped her.

"Air you goin' to Bud Davis?" he asked.

"I am."

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth," he said quietly, and his voice had lost all its impatience, "Ma'y 'Lizbeth, ef you'll set down peaceable an' quietlike for a spell, I think I

kin clear things up for you a bit; then after that you kin go to Bud with what you will."

He drew her gently to the arm-chair, and the girl took her seat, wonderingly watching his changed face. The deep lines of it had softened indescribably, almost pitiably. He looked old and pained as he leaned on the little table between them and studied her face.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth, do you want to know what thar is behind me an' Babe? Do you want to know why John Marshall let you tell that story ag'inst him? Why he stayed here after he thought he was done licked in spite o' bein' twict warned to go? Do you want to know why you oughtn't to go to Bud Davis in the desp'rate mood you air in?"

"Why—why—yes!"

"Then look at me with Welchel Dale's eyes, child, for hit takes courage to hurt you."

"What is it, Uncle Beck?" She was looking at him with Welchel Dale's eyes, but the old man's gaze gradually lowered before their blue purity till he sat staring at his own knotted and seamed hands. After a little he began slowly:

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth, the people 'bout here have been sayin'—the people 'bout here have been sayin'—they've been sayin'—bad things 'bout you an' John Marshall." He paused a moment, but he did not look up, and only the tick of the little clock on the mantel answered him. He cleared his throat vigorously and then went on:

"Gran'ma Thaggin told Marshall 'bout hit, an'

Marshall raised the old devil with Shan. Melissa told me he'd a-kilt Shan ef she hadn't a-stepped in between 'em. He told Shan he'd beat him into a jelly ef either him or his womenfolks ever opened their mouth 'bout you ag'in. The next mornin' he went to you at Aunt Millie's an' told you you might could repeat anything you knowed ag'inst him. Marshall told Babe all about hit so he could put him on guard to not let nobody tell you, 'cause he was skeered—hit—would shame you so hit would break your heart. He told Babe, Marshall did, that he give you permission to tell all about his reservoy scheme so you could prove to the people that you was their friend ag'inst him. An' he told Babe to paint him black to the people so they would think the more of you—an' so that they would—would stop sayin'—sayin'—the knotted old hands were holding their interest well—"stop sayin' that you—was his property.—But Millie Davis an' Bud has been a-tellin' 'em sence that you jes turned 'ginst Marshall 'cause he had done got tired of you an' th'owed you off, an' that hit was all true—'bout—'bout you an' him."

It was only a faint little cry, but it went to the old man's heart, and he started and looked up with a hard pain in his throat as the girl sank with her arms and head prone on the table.

Instantly one of the knotted and seamed hands was laid on the brown curls. It was shaking, and so was the old man's voice:

"Marshall 'lowed that you was too frail to stand

knowin' 'bout their talk, but I knowed Welchel Dale's sperit, an' I knowed hit was tougher fibre than that. I knowed hit could stand the truth—'Uncle Beck' knowed hit could stand the truth an' be brave in face of hit, *he* knowed hit"—the old man's fingers were wandering tenderly among the tumbled curls—

"Wa-al, wa-al"—he continued with a deep-drawn sigh—"things have jes gone from bad to worse, somehow, an' somebody told Marshall the other day that Bud an' Trav was a-goin' to—to—oh, I disremember the details now, but anyhow, Marshall come to the store yistiddy an' called out Trav an' Bud an' told 'em right up an' down that ef they made another single move ag'inst you, he was a-goin' to kill 'em both on sight."

A shudder ran through the girl's slight frame from head to foot, but she did not look up, and the old man continued:

"So you see, honey, this here thing o' character is many-sided, an' we can't see all sides from jes one stand-p'int. Marshall th'owed his own plans to the wind to give you a chanct to win over your enemies, an' he has stayed here stubbornlike ever sence to see that nobody didn't do nothin' to you, though me an' Babe both have told him we wouldn't give ten cents for his skin ef he didn't light out.

"*That*, honey, is the coin John Marshall has bought me an' Babe with. An' we have decided betwixt us two that although we air goin' to fight the feller to the last through the courts 'bout this

here land business, we ain't a-goin' to stand by an' see him butchered.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth—Ma'y 'Lizabeth, brace up, gal! Set up now—set up—that's hit, honey, that's hit—face the siterwation! Welchel Dale could face anything when he seen the way."

"But, but," she faltered—"oh God, I've *lost* the way!"

There was a long silence between them, and then the old man began to move about on tip-toe, as if death had entered the cabin door and summoned away something that was never more to return.

When he came back to the girl who still sat with her face covered, he said in a half-whisper:

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth, gal, here's a letter what your gardeen sont me for you when you come home last fall. He said for you not to have it tell you had tried and failed.—You don't feel equal to hit now? —Wa-al, Uncle Beck will jes slip hit in your pocket here, an' you kin read hit when—when you're feelin' more like hit.

"Hit's Uncle Beck's own brave little gal, that's whose gal hit is!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MARY ELIZABETH did not count the remaining hours of that fateful day. When Uncle Beck brought her home in his buggy and entered with her to bespeak kindness toward her at the hands of the Davises, she slipped into her own room at once, and, throwing herself on her bed, lay with one white arm across her eyes without thought of the passage of time.

The family had already returned from church, for she had been long at Uncle Beck's. The dinner hour must have come in due course, for there came a time when Babe tipped to the door to ask her if she wasn't "hongry," and if he couldn't fetch her something to eat.

Then the long afternoon hours, too, must have passed somehow, for now the day noises were gradually sinking into a drowsy quiet, and the night noises were stirring the forest.

Then Babe tipped in again to ask if she wasn't hongry, and to receive again the same discouraging, but perfectly quiet reply—and then, bedtime sounds in the next room—and after a space, stillness.

There seemed to elapse a long period of stillness, and then the girl struggled up to a sitting posture, and caught up and fastened her dishevelled hair.

The atmosphere of the little room was very close, too close to allow a body to think, or to care what happened. Outside it would be better, and the others were all asleep, they would not hear.

She opened the door cautiously. Yes, it was black dark—but—lightning! And thunderheads! And the trees were beginning to stir. Over yonder among the great swaying pines, under that piled-up and surging blackness in the heavens, with now and again the white lightning over all, one might hope to shake off this killing numbness, one might hope to think, to suffer, to live again!

Mary Elizabeth slipped off the little porch in an interlude in the dense blackness, and hurried across the yard space, across the washed and rolling clay stretches, to seek inspiration of the now protesting pines. Yes, the wind was springing up, there was battle in the air! Giant and Titan were opposed to each other. And out of the South the black wrack was being driven across the dim dark sky. Oh, for the lightning!

The girl had flung herself down on the pine needles now, in the midst of the struggling hosts, but where she could watch the inky thunderheads boiling above. Oh, for the lightning!—the white lightning over all!

And oh, for the power to suffer again!

But it was gone! Gone with all the rest—with the power to think, to hope, to laugh, to live; and nothing was left but the memory of the exquisite pain of it all, but this wild invocation to the spirit of the storm to descend again.

Suddenly, the girl flattened herself out on the brown earth with the instinct of the wild life from which she had sprung. She laid her ear to the ground. There were sounds approaching—sounds that were not of the coming storm. Footsteps, yes, heavy footsteps!

Some one—*something*—was coming right toward her in the blackness!

As swift as a snake that glides to shelter, the girl drew her lithe body across the pine straw to the foot of a giant pine. She flattened herself against the great trunk; she glided slowly round it, and lay up against it as close as the clinging ivy might. Her every sense was alert. She had been bred in the hills and born amidst their wildness, and the little more than a decade of higher civilization that had been vouchsafed to her suddenly fell away from her. She belonged to the hills, to the night, to whatever of storm threatened from the black wrack driving over, or from those heavy footsteps on the darker earth beneath.

The footsteps! They were coming nearer! They must be on this side the gully—on this side the fence—they were here, *here*, right in this clump of pines, now—and now they were under this very tree—they were—oh, God! something was on the other side this very trunk to which she was clinging; if she would but reach out her hand she could touch—*what it was!*

And now—voices! Mary Elizabeth's heart stood still to hear.

"What I want to know is, have you got enough of sidin' ag'in your own an' havin' that feller Marshall givin' warnin' to you an' me?" It was Bud Davis's voice that was speaking, and it sounded so near that the girl started as if he had spoken in her ear. In one of those moments of stillness that come just before a storm, Trav Williams's voice was easily recognizable in reply:

"I ain't been a-sidin' ag'in my own, I've been workin' my might an' main to settle this thing in the way that would be easiest on us all."

"Wa-al, have you got *enough* of hit?"

"I've got enough of Beck Login, all right, an' I lay I'm goin' to stop his runnin' over ever'body in the settlement, an' a-takin' the part, underhanded, of ever' damned stranger that comes prowlin' round. But you needn't a-think we kin make way with that devil on the hill as easy as we done with Welchel Dale, an' have nobody bother to ast questions 'bout hit."

"Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Don't call names—don't call *that* name—somebody might hear!"

The other's voice was grating and jeering as he replied:

"You're skeered! You're skeered right this minute that Welchel Dale's sperit is hoverin' near!"

"Don't!"

The other laughed—"Do you know what tree this is?"

He was answered with an oath and the sound as of a man springing to his feet.

"Yes," the jeering voice went on, "this is whar we done hit, an' ef ghosts *could* ha'nt, Welchel Dale's sperit would raise hell with us to-night!—Set down, Bud. Don't play the coward."

There was the sound as of the scraping of a man's shoulders against the rough bark, and then Bud Davis's voice again:

"An' who's thar to ast questions about Marshall, I'd like to know? An' Shan's done sold out to him. *Sold out* to him! What you got to say 'bout that?"

"That John Marshall'll never live to set foot on that place."

"Do you mean hit, Trav, do you mean hit?—What was *that!*"

"Welchel Dale's sperit right behind you, Bud!" and Trav laughed again.

A volley of oaths from the other was checked with:

"Now look a-here, Bud, ef you're a-goin' to he'p settle this here business, you've got to git your nerve in better trainin'. I was jes tryin' you."

"My nerve's all right for business, ef that's what you're up to, but I don't want no more foolin' with—*with*—dead an' gone troubles. Now what's your idea?"

"We must finish him to-night."

"*To-night?*"

"To-night."

"When?"

"Jes 'fore day—'long 'tween three an' four o'clock

is a good time. He'll be soundest asleep in that part o' the night."

"How, Trav?"

"Shoot him like a dog."

"Which one of us?"

"You an' me an' Ri Slaton an' Jim Haskins an' Eli Thornton, an' ol' man Slocum's boys ef we need 'em.—What you think?"

"Git the Slocums, of course."

"I knowed you was a-goin' to say hit. Wa-al, ef you think hit'll take seven of us to stop one feller's breath, you kin go after the Slocums yourself an' bring 'em to my house."

"Will they all he'p, you reckon? Beck Login's got a powerful hold on 'em."

The fierce oath that answered was followed by: "Don't you know the jig's up with us now ef we don't pull together? An' don't they all know hit by now? Why, I could a-got ever' man in the valley ef I'd a-wanted 'em—but I picked my men. Ri an' Jim an' Eli air a-goin' to meet thar 'bout midnight, an' we'll have a little jamboree 'fore we start out—Lord—Lord—thar's Welchel Dale's sperit right behind you!"

There was the instant shuffling of feet again, and oaths, followed by the noise of a man breaking his way through the bushes, and by a jeering laugh; then later, slower, more deliberate steps—and silence.

And then the lightning! The white lightning over all!

The hovering, menacing storm came down. Out

of the south it descended. The soft and purring south had waked to tiger fierceness. The primeval forest roared defiance, and the fight was on!

Out from a dense group of the battling giants, away from the sheltering trunk to which it had clung, a slight figure sprang—staggered, and recovered again—and then, heedless of falling boughs, heedless of the lick of the forked tongues of fire across the black sky, went running down the wind.

Welchel Dale's spirit was abroad in the storm!

But only for a short space was that phantom-like figure swept before the wind. The time came when the opposing hill had to be breasted, and, with it, a flanking movement of the blast that was now coming cold down the narrow trough between the mountains. There came a time when the open roadway had to be abandoned for a pathless route through the crashing forest where there was nothing to point the way but the instinct of the woman of the hills and—the white lightning!

Alive, awake at last! Oh, the fierce joy, the fierce pain of it! Oh, the wild ecstasy of heroic suffering—now, now that the storm had come down!

Blown panting against a jagged rail fence among a tangle of blackberry bushes one minute, clinging to a young sapling and bending with it against a sudden blast at another, or prone on the ground with her ear to the trembling earth, the girl was fightingly awake.

She, Mary Elizabeth, could save him! She could save him!

A sudden gust swept her against a huge boulder

and pinioned her to it, but she only lay against it, lithe and ready to attack again.

Oh, those hours of death in life, where now was their cruel significance—now that the storm had come down? As light as the pine needles now flying before the wind those petty indignities, those petty slanders, had been swept away by a descending storm that stripped truth to a naked cruelty and left only the great primal facts of life to survive.

They were going to murder John Marshall! And the girl flung herself against the blast again.

For a hundred yards, perhaps, she prevailed, and then a sudden gust caught her, twisted her around, and flung her face downward among a wreck of shivered boughs whose sharp projections tore her tender flesh.

They were going to murder John Marshall! But she could creep to him—creep to him on her hands and knees, even in the face of the wind. But it was hard, desperately hard, and the wind must perforce have conquered if the great raindrops had not come to the rescue.

She could stand upright now, for it was rain against wind, and she was forgotten in that mightier struggle. But the rain brought hail—a fierce, cold, pounding hail—that beat on her bowed head and arms till she cried out with the pain of it. But——

They were going to murder John Marshall! And she struggled on.

John Marshall flung another log on his fire and sat down again to listen to the storm.

Heavens! but it was coming fast and furious now! It must be tearing those trees limb from limb; but they were dying hard, for the deep and sullen roar which they sent up was of the death struggle of all wild things that fight to the last.

What a night to be out in!—and he punched up the fire again.

Magazines and papers had been pushed aside. His pipe lay unlighted at his elbow. Somehow, he could not get down to reading to-night. His brain was on fire with what he sighted beyond: The dream city yonder on the plains—the forge of another Vulcan—and here, his mountain lake, his source of inexhaustible power and future setting for costly summer homes and club-houses for those who could pay his price.

He had conquered—he was lord of all he surveyed! He had won out against the cataclysm of opposing odds. He could now push to a finish his demonstration to the man within him—he could do great things as well as dream them! But——

The girl in the firelight there, what did it mean for her?

And when, in all the bitter season now almost past, did the draughts through the crannies of this cursed den ever run so cold? The haunted house!—haunted by a something that shadowed the last of its race!

Hail, now! And heavy lightning, and ripping winds again!

Was *she* afraid to-night?

John Marshall stood up uneasily and looked about

him. Something was getting on his nerves. Was it that this weird and uncanny roost he had seized on was at last fastening its influence on him, or was it the wild night—or both? Somehow the wind went through him to the marrow to-night, and the cry of the storm pierced him like a note of human anguish.

Was she safe to-night? Was she? She was such a frail little body—such a frail little spirit!

God knew that he had done what he could to protect her! He had tried to remove her from the troubles which compassed her about, but she had refused to go. To save her from persecution, he had offered up for sacrifice the ambitions of his manhood, but all to no avail for her. When perils closed about him, he had doggedly remained near her still to protect. And here he was, and here he would continue as long as she remained—that much was settled!

Yes, the devil was to pay with the whole situation, but he had scored one against him yesterday when he took the dilemma by the horns and warned that Davis viper and Williams not to raise a finger against the girl.

That he would have to take these two men in hand before their persecution of Mary Elizabeth should culminate in their dismissing her from her position, he had realized ever since he had known of their compact; but his unexpected acquisition of the Thaggin farm had hastened the climax. The trade accomplished, it had suddenly been borne in upon him that the moment these men should learn by the disappearance of the Thaggins of his triumph over the

valley, that moment would their wrath break over the innocent object of their persecution, on account of her supposed connection with him. So he had deliberately sought these men in public and put them on notice. But this forcing of the issue had been at greatly increased risk to himself.

He ought to have had time to summon help before hazarding general trouble with these fierce natives. The Thaggin farm was his now, as so was every other foot of land that he had coveted. It was only a question of a few days before he would have here some hundred men to do his bidding, in face of whose overpowering force the little handful of hillites and their petty hates would weigh as the pine needles before the wind.

He had had to seize the Thaggin farm when it was offered, but he had hoped that the news of the disappearance of the owners would not be noised about until he got time to summon the workmen from the camp. Still, in weighing the matter, he had realized how frail was such a hope, and so he had promptly delivered his ultimatum to Williams and Davis. If the Thaggins should be missed at once, he had reasoned, the chances were that Bud Davis would turn on Mary Elizabeth for her suspected alliance with him and drive her——

God, what a night to be out in!

So he had given Bud his warning in order to forestall any act of violence from him; but, as he had said to Babe, he was no fool—he knew what it might mean for himself. Trav Williams and Bud Davis,

with a pack at their heels, had set upon Welchel Dale in the night. Yes, he was up against it.

And he knew yesterday that he would be up against it, if he should throw caution to the wind and fling down the gauntlet to those two. He really ought to have sent the boys at the camp word by the Thaggins, but he had not, and all on account of Fred Dearing. Yes, but he had done only the square thing by Fred. If he had sent word that a crisis had come, Dearing would have come to him—he knew it. But Dearing was unalterably opposed to his splendid project, and it would somehow have been taking an underhold on the fellow to allow obligations of friendship to mix him up with the scheme in any degree. Fred was leaving for home to-morrow and then he could summon help against any concerted attack incited by Davis and Williams—if the morrow should come for him.

And, added to this unwillingness to involve Dearing in a scheme to which he was so bitterly opposed, was the very flimsy but very human reason of wanting to be able to drop in on the boys Monday night with the news that the deeds to the last necessary foot of land had been recorded—that he had won his fight for mastery, single-handed. The boys at the camp had *laughed*, he hotly remembered. So, he had sent his perfectly non-committal note by the Thaggins, and here he was!

But he was not going to be caught napping! The haunted house presented impenetrable walls of logs to the enemy, and the one small window and two

doors had been made strong with iron hooks and bars. Besides, a repeating Winchester and a brace of good pistols with plenty of cartridges were not to be discounted. He would make a night of it, and be ready for anything that should come.

But such a night! Surely even Trav Williams and that Bud Davis would choose another and more clement night in which to pay their respects to him. Not even they would choose to face that storm.

It was coming even fiercer now, and with rain, and hail—a pounding, beating hail! Praise be to the Lares and Penates of the haunted house for their shelter from this cruel night!

Suddenly, Marshall grasped his Winchester—a knock, a very distinct knock, sounded on the door.

He waited some moments in dead silence, and then called:

“Who is it?”

But only the echo answered him.

“Who is it?” he called again. The wind replied, and the beating hail, and under and over and through it all, the roar of the whipped pines like the sound of many waters.

Marshall retreated to the wall at the side of the door where the thick logs interposed between him and whatever rifle message might shortly be sent him.

“Who is it?” he shouted for the third time. But still no answer came to him except from the raging night.

With ear and eye alert he watched for some sign of

disturbance at the door, and he moved closer and looked at the crack beneath it expecting to see the muzzle of a rifle, when—his eye fell upon something that looked like a wisp of hair—long, dark hair—blowing through the crevice.

John Marshall never remembered how he got that door open, and never did he forget the face of the unconscious girl as she lay on his doorstep with the wind and rain and hail beating down upon her.

The next moment, he was holding her high in his arms and the rain was swirling in on the two of them and the lamp had been blown out.

It was a quick struggle to shut and bar out the storm again, and then Marshall was down on knees before the glowing fire with his cold, wet little burden still in his arms.

It was well that there was only the wild night to hear the torrent of wild things that he said to her, and only the glowing firelight to see him press his tortured face to her unanswering heart, while he called, again and again, and all unconsciously, on the God that even godless men keep in the unexplored depths of them for the extremities of their need.

It might have been only a few moments or it might have been many that he knelt there before the fire with the unconscious girl in his arms; but after a time he had his answer, for a little quivering sigh was slowly drawn through her lips, she turned her head slightly, and then her eyelids trembled and opened slowly. John Marshall's face was very close to hers and her first look was into his eyes.

He called her by her name with the best show that he could put up of calmness, but she did not answer. She only looked at him wonderingly, then smiled a slow, happy, meaningless smile, and fainted again.

Marshall got back his nerve somehow, and in a few minutes had her laid on a pile of pillows before the fire and was putting some brandy between her lips.

When she again opened her eyes, it was in no state of happy forgetting, for with the light of consciousness this time came instant understanding and instant terror.

"Quick, they are coming to kill you!" she cried, and she struggled to rise.

Marshall caught her and pushed her gently back among the pillows. His face was drawn as he asked:

"But you, *you!* For God's sake, how is it with you?"

"*I?*" said the girl, wonderingly, and then, as a sudden wave of memory brought back why it was he feared for her, she exclaimed:

"Oh, I am *all right*—nobody has been unkind to me. But you—they are coming to kill you, I tell you!"

"Has Bud Davis been saying anything cruel to you?" he insisted; "tell me the truth," and he became conscious for the first time that he was holding her against the pillows by both arms.

"No, no, on my honor, no! But they are coming to-night—Bud and Trav Williams, and Ri Slaton and—and—there are seven of them. They are coming

at three o'clock to-night, and they are going to shoot you! What time is it? Quick! What *time* is it?"

"Twenty-three minutes to eleven. Do be quiet. I have nearly half the night to get ready for them. Lie still, child; don't you know that you are half dead!"

The girl sank back on the pillows with something of relief in her eyes at the knowledge that the hour for the descent of the murderous crew was not imminent.

"And you came through this storm to tell me! You did this for me. You did this for me!" he kept saying over and over again, as he busied himself in spreading out her wet skirts before the glowing fire and in arranging across the pillow the mass of limp dark hair that was beginning to curl to life again under the warmth.

She was lying partly on her hair, and he tried to lift her shoulder gently to free it, when the girl cried out in pain.

"What is it?" he asked, startled. "Oh, your poor little arm and shoulder—how on earth did it happen?"

She looked at the cause of the man's deep concern and saw that the sleeve and shoulder of her dress had been almost torn away and that her white flesh was streaked with blood. So much of her little body ached that she had not before realized how much her arm pained her.

"I was blown down on something sharp once," she answered, as she put one hand up to gather her torn sleeve together, and turned her face away from the

sight of the fresh blood. "Just wrap a towel or something about it, so I can't see it, please—I——"

Marshall hurriedly relit the lamp to examine the arm by a steadier light than the leaping fire afforded, and now came back and knelt beside her.

"You must let me see how badly it is hurt," he said quietly. "It's all right for me to do it; take your hand away, now. My—! The flesh is torn—a little—and there are some splinters in it. Just lie still."

He stirred about the room for some minutes and Mary Elizabeth's eyes followed him as he moved. When he came back to her side, he had a basin of water with him and a lot of white things.

"I am going to hurt you a little," he said, still steadily, "but these splinters will have to come out. Then we'll bathe it with an antiseptic and bandage it up." There was so much of the quiet assurance of the physician in his tone that the girl gave a swift, curious glance up into his face. His lips were set tight. She glanced down—the long, strong hands that were alway so sure of themselves were shaking. Then she shut her eyes again, and kept them shut as the man laid back the tattered sleeve and ministered to her wounded arm with infinite tenderness of touch, but with voice held down to the dead level of the scientific while he worked.

And in between the sharp pains that he inflicted, Mary Elizabeth detailed to him the plot which had been burnt into her soul by the white lightning. She remembered every word that had been spoken, and she repeated what she had heard.

Once Marshall paused a moment for a swift, sure glance into her eyes. It was at the mention of his warning to the two men. But the girl looked away and asked:

"What did you warn them about?"

He went back to his bandaging, but with a quick hardening of feature as he replied, briefly:

"Told them to keep off my preserves."

The long lashes swept her cheeks suddenly, but he was too busy to see.

When he had fastened the last bandage, he gathered up the torn edges of the dress sleeve and shoulder in a business-like fashion and, somehow, pinned them together again. Mary Elizabeth was struggling to help him now, and her cheeks were flaming.

Then he gathered up the white things that were left, together with the basin, and carried them back to the mysterious from whence they had been produced.

The girl followed him with her eyes—quiet till he began to take down the heavy bar that secured the rear door, when she was on her feet in an instant. The bar was a little difficult to remove, however, and he had not succeeded in lifting it from its brackets before the frightened girl was beside him, clinging to his arm.

"Don't, *don't!*" she cried. "Oh, can't you see that you'll be offering yourself as a target? How do you know how many others are in this plot against you? *Don't!*"

"But I've got to see if the rain has stopped," he protested.

"What difference does the rain make to us?"

"Why—why, I've got to take you home as soon as it holds up."

"But——"

"But what?" He was looking at her very straight.

"But—I'm not going." Her hands had dropped from his arm, but he did not shift his own position a half-inch. His eyes were still on her face, still intense.

"Why not?" he asked very quietly.

"Because"—and the girl slowly raised her head and answered his steady gaze with a gaze as steady—"because, if I stay I can bring those men to their senses. I saved the life of Ri Slaton's sick baby not long ago, and he knows it and is grateful to me; and the two Slocums, poor fellows, are both of them in love with me. Then Trav Williams and Bud have confessed in my hearing to the murder of my father—I can hold that over them, if persuasion fails. You must go—you must ride for your life to the camp, and I'll stay here and turn them back—or, even if the worst comes to the worst, I can greatly delay them from following you."

"Go, and *leave you*, girl? Did you believe that I would do it?"

He noticed that she shivered in the draught from around the ill-fitting door, and he left the bar in its place and hurried her back to the fire.

"The sooner you get dry, the sooner I can take you back where you belong," he said, with a grim touch of command in his voice.

"But I'm not going."

"Yes, you are."

"Well—if I let you take me back, will you ride right on to the camp?"

"Mary Elizabeth," he began with tender impatience, and he took a seat on the edge of the table and assumed an argumentative attitude, "this is one time when you've got to let me use my own judgment without a row. To begin with, Selim has been wantonly lamed by some unknown fiend, and Donnie is at the camp. There is absolutely nothing here to ride on. To end with, there are reasons—imperative reasons—why I should remain here and let the inevitable clash between Trav Williams and myself come now. Bud Davis is out of the question, but Williams is a man, and he and I have got to get down to it, sooner or later.

"Then, if he attacks me here, I can kill him without getting into trouble over it. Of course, I don't enjoy the idea of the numbers he is plotting to bring against me—Why, child, don't you get scared about that—the pioneer Indian fighters never had a better block-house than this, and I've got ammunition to burn. You see, as soon as I get you home——"

"But I'm not *going* home. No, listen to me! Let me stay here; and when I hear them coming, I'll go out to meet them—listen, I tell you, it's my time to talk—I'll take a lantern along to show them who I am so they won't hurt me. And they won't hurt *me*, not even Trav Williams would do that.—

Hush, and let me finish!—I can turn the Slocums back, and I can turn Ri Slaton back. Bud Davis is wildly afraid of my father's spirit—I'll give *him* the scare of his life! And if Trav Williams is afraid of the law, I'll scare him too. Don't you see what a help I'll be to you?"

"God! But you are precious!"

His eyes had deepened to intensity as the girl kindled before him, and the sudden exclamation now burst from him all unawares. The next moment, however, he throttled the mood that was upon him, for the girl had drawn insensibly away, startled by his vehemence.

"No," he said, slowly, and he picked up a magazine from the table and idly opened it in his attempt to appear master of himself—"it's a piece with your coming here to-night, through this storm—this wanting to stay and help me fight it out. But it can't be, girl, it can't be."

"It's going to be." There was a bridled something in her voice, too, this time.

The man raised his eyes from the book that he was fingering and looked steadily at her.

"Mary Elizabeth," he said, "there is a reason—an all-conquering reason—why you must not be found here even in the capacity of a messenger of fate. I'm going to take you home."

"I know the reason," she replied, "but it is not all-conquering."

The man's restless fingers stopped still with a half-turned page between them.

"I know the talk," the girl continued. "Uncle Beck told me—he told me all about it. I know why"—she was white to her temples, but she brought her averted glance back to his own burning gaze—"I know why you let me jeopardize your dearest interests and rouse these people against you. I know why you stayed here after you thought you had failed—when Melissa Thaggin refused to sign those deeds. Uncle Beck told me. He told me all about it. He told me that you told Babe to paint you black to the people, so they would think the more of me for what I had done for them. Uncle Beck told me that you went to Trav Williams and Bud and told them that you were going to kill them on sight if they made a move against me. I know how you have"—and the long lashes swept her cheeks for a moment—"how you have struggled to keep me from hearing; Babe told Uncle Beck that you said it would—break my heart. But you didn't know me. My father could face *anything* when he saw his way. I am his child."

"You—knew—all this? Then you know what it would mean for you to be found here to-night?"

"Yes, I know."

The next instant he had snatched her to his breast.

"Don't!" she cried, struggling against his fierce kisses as he bent her little body back till the lamp-light swept her white face—"don't—oh, don't! I came here to-night because—I—felt that I *could* come!"

She staggered from the instant release of his supporting arms and caught by the big table. Marshall dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

After a long minute he got up and crossed the room to the rear door again. He unbarred it and flung it open.

The girl's hands met in a spasmodic clasp, but this time she did not interfere. She only stood still till he should move again. And it seemed to her an unconscionable time that he stood there with his back to her and his face to the whipping winds, but after that unmeasured time of fear, he closed and barred the door again, and came back to the fire.

"The clouds are blacker than ever," he said, as he busied himself with the fire. "I am afraid we'll have a good little wait before we can start back."

"Yes, we'll have a good little wait before we start back," she replied.

Marshall turned quickly from the fire:

"Of course you know that you are going."

"No, I know that I am going to stay."

"Mary Elizabeth, do you really understand that it is your *reputation* which is at stake?"

"And *your life*—yes, I understand."

"But the stakes are not of equal value." He was as quiet now, as direct and simple as herself. In the face of the fate overhanging, the veneerings had dropped away and the two of them had got down to

essentials. "The stakes are not of equal value," he insisted.

"No," she replied, "a man's life is worth more than a woman's reputation."

"And where on God's earth did you get your standards?"

"Not from the men about me; from the woman here," and she laid her hand on her breast.

"The woman there," he said, "the woman there, Mary Elizabeth, is the truest woman in the world, but she has *lied* to you!"

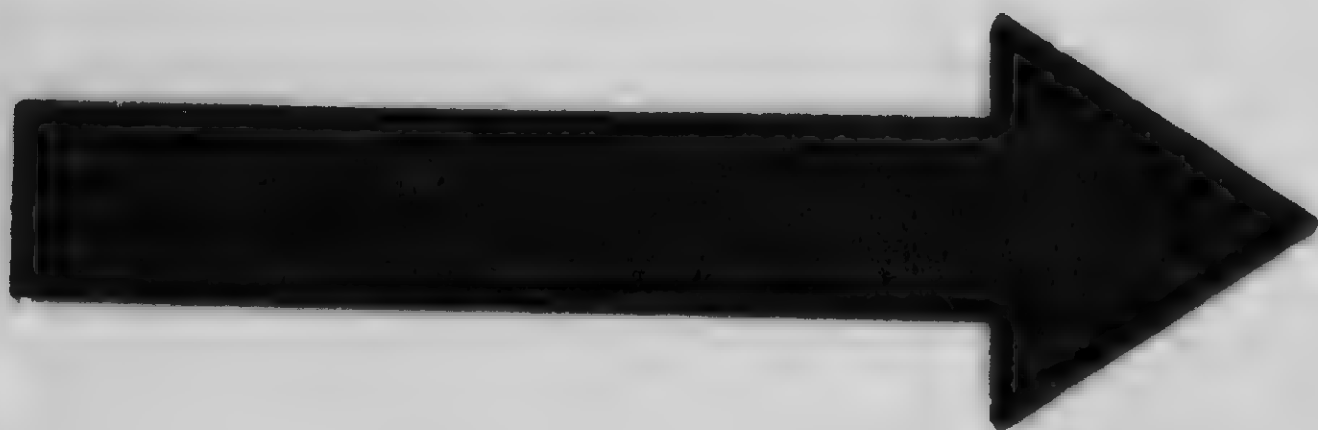
"She has told me only what is true."

"Not when the life is mine and the reputation yours.—Mary," he said, and his bronzed face paled as he said it, "you are the only spotless thing that has touched my life. *I will not* sacrifice you."

Suddenly, a terrific crash of thunder shivered the momentary quiet; and then the four winds of heaven seemed to gather themselves together and hurl their combined strength upon the haunted cabin in final reckoning of its evil accounts. The heavens opened and the rains descended in sheets again; the thunders boomed along the sky; the four winds of heaven, opposed now as to which should drink deepest of vengeance, grappled in a struggle for mastery in which the ghost trees that sentinelled the haunted ground were torn from their stiff, dead hold upon the accursed earth and flung prone upon it, or left naked of whatever stark limbs they dared to oppose to the avenging winds of heaven.

THE RIGHT OF THE STRONGEST 363

The man and the girl looked at each other—a long understanding look—and then they returned—he with heaving breast to the glow of the red fire—she, with eyes dark with mystery, to the spirit of the storm.

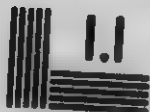


MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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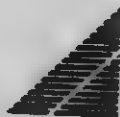
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CHAPTER XXV

ANOTHER rending, shivering blast tore its way through the dead forest, and the man turned to the woman who had come to him through the storm.

Her head was up, and her dark, limp locks were flung back. She was looking away, through the near and visible, to the distant unseen.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"*That!*"

"The storm?"

"Yes—storm."

The man shifted his position a little uneasily but his eyes were still upon her, trying to read through the slightly averted face what lay beneath.

"It's like that," he said, "the breaking down and tearing away of old dead and useless things by the onward sweep of progress. It always seems cruel and terrible, but old things must go down."

"Old loves—old faiths?" she breathed.

"Yes, and resisting longest, old hates," the man replied.

"The right of the strongest!"

John Marshall got up restlessly and changed the position of his chair, but the girl turned a little away from the new view he commanded of her face. It was as if she were to be forever a little beyond his understanding.

"Why, yes," he said. "The strongest must prevail. It is that way in nature. And it is that way in society—even all government is, in the last analysis, by the right of the strongest.—Progress," he continued, after a moment's pause in which the sound of dead things' being swept before the blast filled up the interlude—"progress is often accompanied by seeming cruelty, but since it is *progress*—that must be the justification of its agent."

The girl turned to him.

"*That*," she said, "is one of your mistakes. God used Pharaoh to punish the Children of Israel to their ultimate good, but He did not justify Pharaoh."

"Isn't it hitting below the belt to quote Scripture to a man who does not subscribe to it?"

The dark eyes fixed his own for a moment of inquiry, and then turned again to the unseen. The man experienced a curious, sinking feeling of being by himself, alone, unable to follow.

"And you are really going to take these people's homes away from them? You are really going to do this thing?" The desolate moan of a departing gust interposed between question and reply.

"If you insist on putting it that way—yes."

"I have always tried to believe that when the test came, you would not do it."

The man rose quickly from his chair and began walking up and down the room.

"Don't you see," he urged, with the old masterful finality, "that if land belongs to the first who seizes it, then, by the same token, it will belong to any

other who can take it for himself? In urging the claims of these people, you are but justifying me."

She did not look away as he paused before her in challenge, but she was still immeasurably removed.

"I don't think you have ever been quite fair to me," she returned steadily. "You have always had the intellectual advantage, and you have never scrupled to use it against me. You, somehow, won't meet me with my own weapons."

Something swept the old dominating self of him out of his strong face as he answered:

"Mary Elizabeth, you'll have to remember that I have never known you before to-night—that I do not know you now. Speak to me in terms of yourself, and let me try to understand."

The look with which she answered reached out to him across the space between.

"Why," she replied, "this thing that you have wrought here is a tragedy as big as the human heart is big. Ultimate good—even if ultimate good had been your motive—could not justify or excuse it. Progress is not something to be forced down the throat of a people, it is something that must develop from within them. Yes, I know—the stimulus often comes from without, but it should come as a stimulus only, and not as a destroying force that outrages the traditions of a people and leaves scars that never heal."

She paused for his reply, but he only said: "Go on."

The furious night interposed, and for a space the

girl listened with head up and lips apart. The man was studying her face when she turned to him again.

"And it is not," she said, "as if this project of yours were their one and only chance. Others would have come, not to violate, to destroy—but to inspire. Oh," she cried in sudden passionate appeal to him, "it is not just these few little mountain acres that are in contest—it's what they stand for! You know—you must *feel* what it would mean to take the fight out of a man, to—to show him up to himself as incapable of defending, of proving, of justifying, that which is in the deepest sense, *himself*. You *must* know!"

The man suddenly put up his hand in a gesture of defence:

"I don't believe that it goes that deep with them," he protested.

"You know Babe Davis? You know the man in *him*? This thing that you have done is going to *destroy* him! It makes little difference now how Babe got his pitiful little plot of ground, his crude traditions. The only thing that signifies now is, shall he keep *inviolate* that which stands for the achievements of his fathers? Shall his ideals be left to him?"

"Ideals," protested the man, "ideals themselves are subject to change. How else could we progress?"

"To change, yes, but not to annihilation. Even poor Babe could change from within—he has changed, grown, for your sake and for mine."

"Don't!"

"Oh, you don't like my weapons? Well, you are going to show Babe up to himself in his pitiful inadequacy. You are going to violate before his eyes the temples of his faith and show him how powerless he is to defend them."

"But, Mary, I—I have long determined to make it all right with Babe. I"—somehow his voice lacked the assurance that usually characterized it—"I have always intended to make him indepen—" the girl smiled bitterly and the man hastened to correct, "I have always meant to give him—to pay him for what he lost through me."

"Do you know of any largess that would repay a man for the right to *be* a man?"

"But—you put things so cruelly. I'm not denying to Babe Davis the right to——"

"Doesn't every man have the right to be a man in his own way? On his own plane?"

"Every man but myself," he replied, with sudden bitterness.

There was again the note of human anguish in the cry of the storm outside, and the next moment the girl was clinging to his arm.

"Say that you did it for their sakes as well as for your own," she pleaded. "Say that you took this step with their best good at heart!"

White to the temples, the man shrank under her clinging touch, but he looked straight into her eyes.

"I will not, I will *not* lie to you," he protested.

"Then—then"—her tight little hands would not

be shaken off, and she held his gaze by the power of her own—"then give it up!"

"No!"

"Yes."

"I cannot."

"Give it up for *my* sake."

"No, not for *your* sake.—Mary, listen to me. My word is pledged, my business integrity is at stake. I have borrowed thousands of dollars for which I could give no security except my word. This deal for government lands I had to put through by myself, because I was obliged to swear that there was no company of men to be benefited by the use of the lands. It was a case of colossal daring. I had to own the whole scheme. Yesterday, I needed an immense sum for the project down yonder to keep it from going under. I wired to two friends of mine for financial backing, offering nothing but my word as security. They came to my rescue and saved the scheme. It will take the success of this project here to meet the obligations that I have incurred.—Don't you see——"

"I see"—slowly—"that it has become a choice between injustice to the rich and injustice to the poor."

He was still looking straight into her eyes. "I can't hope to make you understand," he said, with despairing impatience, "that on the one side there is no legitimate claim to the property involved. But you will know what I mean when I say that my word is given."

"But," urged the girl, and her slight hands felt the

tightening of the muscles in the arm to which she still clung—"but, when the choice is between faith to one's word and faith to an eternal principle—what then?"

"Few men are sure of 'eternal principles.' It has to suffice for most of us to keep the faith we pledge."

Suddenly the little clinging hands were laid hard against the man's heaving breast and the eyes dark with mystery were holding his own to themselves.

"If you love me, you'll give this up," she said.

"If I love you, I'll break my word?"

"Yes, if you put it that way."

The man looked into her eyes for a full minute, and then deliberately took her hands from his breast and put them from him.

"Then I don't love you," he said.

A loud knock at the door went through the two of them like an electric shock, and the man wheeled and faced the direction from which the summons came. The girl was beside him in an instant, but he caught her by her two arms and hurried her to the side wall out of gun-shot range.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Babe Davis."

The two looked at each other. It was Babe Davis's voice that had answered, unmistakably.

Marshall sprang to the door to open it, and Mary Elizabeth leaned back against the wall, weak with the sudden release to her taut nerves. The great iron bar was quickly removed and the door flung open. Sure enough, there, silhouetted against the

outer blackness, stood Babe Davis, towering, gaunt, and wet to the bone.

Marshall's hand was stretched out instantly.

"Come in, Babe, come in!" he exclaimed.

But Babe Davis swept aside the hand that was held out in welcome and strode past Marshall into the room. His back was to the girl, who now stood speechless with wonder, as he turned and waited in grim silence while Marshall re-barred the door.

It was the work of a minute to replace the great bar in its brackets, and then Marshall came directly up to the man who had entered, saying steadily, and not unkindly:

"Well, what is it, Babe?"

"You an' me have got to have it out to-night!" said the hillite.

"Oh," exclaimed Marshall—and the girl who was watching his face suddenly feared him to her very marrow—"so you, too, are in this murderous scheme against me! You constituted yourself their entering wedge because you knew that I trusted you! You'll——"

A sudden commanding gesture of a gaunt, brown hand stopped him with his sentence unfinished.

"No, I ain't in with Trav Williams an' them. I wouldn't go in with 'em. But I've said two things, stranger, that I'm here to make good. I've said that I ain't a-goin' to see you shot down 'thout a chance to defend yourse'f. So take notice: the crowd's a-comin' fur you before daylight. An' while they're plannin' to call you outen bed an' shoot you, you kin

bet they will be ready to change their programme to suit any siterwation they find. An' further, stranger, I've said you wa'n't a-goin' to take a foot o' my father's land away from me while I lived. You didn't b'lieve me 'bout the land, stranger, b'cause I didn't cuss an' bluster when I said hit; but I meant hit jes the same. Now will you give up this land-grabbin' projec' an' leave these parts fur good?"

"I will not!"

With a steadiness of nerve that had in it a suggestion of fate, the mountaineer laid two long knives on the table before 'him. "Then take your choice, stranger. We'll settle this thing, man to man, fair an' square, before the others git here. Ef you kin kill me, you'll have time to light out."

The girl in the background stole silently forward. She was enveloped in shadow—the shadow that towered behind the mountaineer, reflecting more nearly the bigness of his spirit than it did the gaunt proportions of the grotesque figure. In one of those moments of instantaneous photographic impression, Marshall felt that she was at one with the man of her people—that she, too, was challenging. He gave one quick, comprehending glance at her over the other man's shoulder, then folded his arms and addressed himself to the man:

"Davis," he said quietly, "I shall enjoy, in a way, the chance to settle with Trav Williams and your brother, but I have no intention of fighting you. No, you are mistaken there! The fact of the business is, I have had first-class athletic training,

and I'd have every advantage of you. Listen a moment: I have always liked and respected you for giving me my orders about Mary Elizabeth. I have honored and trusted you for your faith in her and your goodness to her. For this I want to be friends with you."

The mountaineer before him and the woman in the shadow that he cast did not move a hair's breadth, and John Marshall continued: "Through the carelessness of your forefathers you have been worked a great injustice. I am the direct agent of that injustice, and I'm sorry that it had to be so. If you will be friends, I'll promise to set you up in life, ten times more comfortable than you have ever been——"

Again the gaunt brown hand went up:

"Never mind 'bout what you air a-goin' to give me, stranger, for I'm not acceptin' of charity. The question between us is, air you a-goin' to try to *take my land?*"

The girl in the shadow started silently as John Marshall, with subtly changed face, answered, grimly:

"I have already taken it."

"Then pick up one o' them thar knives."

"I'll not do it."

"*Pick hit up!*"

"No."

"Then, by God, I'll make you glad to!" The infuriated hillite caught up the nearest weapon and drew back with it, but his right arm was seized from behind by the woman in the shadow. Not by main

strength did she detain him, but by the sheer surprise of the move.

He turned and looked into her face:

"Ma'y 'Lizbeth, *you—here!*"

The girl was looking up into his eyes—appealing first, then frightened, then with sudden heart-break.

"Oh, Babe, *you* too!" she cried, dropping her face on the hands with which she still restrained him.

All the hate of which his race was capable gathered in the dark face of the man as he looked for one moment on the bowed head of the girl. In another instant, however, his wrath broke, and he flung her from him with an oath.

John Marshall caught and steadied her and was at the mountaineer so quickly that the actions seemed from one impulse. The next thing the sinewy native knew, his arms were pinioned in a strange new fashion, and he was as helpless as a child, in the hands of his captor.

"It's no test of which of us is the better man, Babe," Marshall panted; "it's a trick learned from the Japs. Now, keep your temper and listen.—She's worth sacrificing for yet. It's a lie—what you thought then—she came here through the storm to warn me because she overheard their plan to shoot me without giving me a dog's chance; and she came knowing what they would think about her if they found her here—but she never could have dreamed that you, Babe—that *you* would misjudge her."

The girl sank to the floor, and the next moment, the two men were kneeling beside her.

"Ma'y 'Lizabeth—honey—" one of them was saying tenderly, when all suddenly—the night was filled with voices—voices calling, voices hallooing, voices cursing!

For one moment of stunned silence the two men looked at each other across the half-fainting girl, and then one of them whispered, hoarsely:

"Tell 'em I fetched her here to try to git you to give up"—and then—"You kin fight hit out with them now; I'll not jump on you with the whole crew agin you."

"Then take care of her," and he sprang for his gun.

A rifle-ball stung its way through the front door and buried itself in a log of the wall beyond. Marshall quickly turned out the lamp, but a fitful blaze flared from the end of a glowing hickory chunk, threatening to play traitor to the stronghold.

At the sharp ring of the missile, the girl was on her feet, and before the dull Babe could realize what she was doing, she had darted to the centre table, snatched up a pistol, and was beside John Marshall, ready for fight.

But with one movement of his arm he swept her behind him. "Babe!" he called desperately, as another and another rifle-ball cut through the thick planks of the door at different angles.

The hillite, awake to the situation now, needed no further summons; and when the girl protested, he picked her up bodily and carried her to the deep

recess between the front wall of the cabin and the huge log-and-mud chimney that extended into the room five or six feet. Here, for the time, she was reasonably safe, for the wall opposite the chimney was unbroken by aperture.

John Marshall was at work now. Three rapid-fire shots from his Winchester, through an aperture in the door attacked, silenced for a moment the batteries in front; and he sprang to the door at the rear and sent a singing message through, only to return as quickly to the front where the firing had recommenced.

He calculated by the crack of their rifles that the stormers were some distance from the house, and he knew that he must keep them at a distance—that the moment the muzzles of their guns could be placed against the crevices of the doors it would be all up with him. If only the room were in black darkness!

The girl, detained in her place of safety by sheer force, was now almost frantic.

"Babe, Babe," she begged, "help him—for God's sake, help him—for my sake, Babe! There's a gun over there in the corner—get it and *shoot!* I swear I'll stay here if you only will—Horrors, how they are firing!—Babe——"

But the erstwhile gentle, docile creature of her leading turned on her with savage vehemence:

"No," he blazed, "no!"

"Then let me go!" cried the girl; "let me fight beside him!——"

This time the man's powerful arm pinioned her against the wall.

"Fight your own kind for *him*?—for him that's robbed 'em?—By God, you won't! You'll stand right here and see him take his medicine!—I've done give him his chance."

Mary Elizabeth cast a despairing look at the man who was waging single-handed his losing fight with death. He had stopped to reload now; the sweat was streaming down his face. The grim lines about his mouth, the quick, sharp movements as he returned fire or threw in the shells, spoke not less eloquently than did the sinister patter of lead against the front wall and splintering door, how desperate were the straits of the cabin's sole defender.

Hugging the wall as best he might, but still dangerously exposed, Marshall once more half-emptied his magazine of bullets, firing into the outer blackness in directions fancied to correspond with the latest flashes from their guns, and again the hostile shots seemed discharged from farther distance.

The girl covered her eyes. If only the Hearer of Prayer *would* hear! She was ready to compromise now—to trade with Him on any terms. But He had turned His face away—away from this spot that was haunted by the tragedies and the violence of sin.

A cessation of the shots inside; the girl opened her eyes wildly.

John Marshall was replenishing his magazine. As he stood facing the fireplace, the blaze of the hickory log seemed bent on having a critical view of him

and shone vividly in the cabin for a brief moment. Something red was dyeing his shirt-sleeve in spots! The spots were widening!

The mountaineer caught the girl in the wild dash that she tried to make, and, heedless of the pitiful cry she uttered, forced her back to the sheltered corner.

"Let him take his medicine," he hissed.

But Marshall had heard, and, dropping his rifle on the table, was at her side in an instant.

"*Mary*, are you hurt? Are you *hurt*?"

It was with the loss of an all-important moment that he stopped to be reassured of her safety, for while he yet paused beside her, frightened, unbelieving, the crisis came. One terrific crash against the timbers of the rear door shook the very rafters of the cabin, bending the bar-brackets and bursting the hinges from the door.

Marshall sprang to regain his rifle, but it was too late. The shattered door was thrown down across his way, and he was facing a half-dozen gun-barrels, while swarming, vengeance-seeking natives were pressing into the room to witness a finale delayed for their gloating enjoyment.

With the falling apart of a big log in the fireplace, the flames leapt high, repeating themselves in weird and fantastic fitfulness on the cold steel of the level guns, and in the veiled glitter of the eyes of a man who stood slightly apart, but who, Marshall knew only too well, was the directing fate of that whole grim company.

The next instant, something had come between John Marshall and death—a slight, frail woman, with arms stretched wide as if to further shelter him, was offering her own breast to the threatening guns.

A big man in the front of the mob knocked up the menacing rifle-barrels in the same moment that Marshall swept the girl aside.

Then, somehow, Babe Davis, stunned and bewildered at the way the girl had flashed away from him, got mixed up in the scene. The astonishment and curiosity created by his presence and by the presence of the girl gave pause for a moment to even their hungry vengeance.

In that moment Mary Elizabeth was pleading with the man who had struck away from her breast the levelled guns.

"Ri, I gave your baby back to you," she panted, "the doctor said I saved his life—you said you would do anything for me—Ri, give me this man's life!"

The room had become strange with men in whose eyes was implacable vengeance, but action was for a space delayed. They were men and not demons, so this woman had to be dealt with, got out of harm's way.

Ri Slaton stood before the pleading girl, his big chest heaving, his hands gripping tight his own rifle-stock. When she had finished speaking he reluctantly placed his gun against the wall and folded his arms.

"I kin do this much," he said, "an' no more. He's got to die."

It was John Marshall himself who silenced her—taking her tight by both arms, he turned to Babe Davis a face in which exasperation and desperation were strangely mixed.

"Babe," he exclaimed, "Babe, it does look as if you could hold her! Take her out of this, can't you?" But he whispered, "*My darling*," as he forcibly consigned her to Babe Davis's keeping. Then he faced his enemies.

"Men," he said, making a play for one last desperate chance, "for you *are* men—I know it's all up with me, and I accept the fact. You can easily shoot me to pieces if you choose, for I am unarmed, but I'm here to tell you that it would be damned unsportsmanlike. Anybody can murder in cold blood, but it takes a *man* to kill like a man. Now, come at me, but come one at a time. Let's be men to the last. There are two knives there—Babe Davis brought them to have it out with me, man to man, with no advantage, except that he brought his second with him." He turned and looked deep into the eyes of the girl whom Babe Davis was now holding tightly by the wrists.

She was standing very straight—and tall for her—and her eyes answered the last-stand courage of his own. He addressed the men again, who were now muttering ominously among themselves.

"Give me one of those knives and give one man at a time the other, and we'll do this thing right."

"Hell!" snarled Bud Davis, "who ever heerd o' givin' a viper like you a weepin'! An' I ain't a-goin' to be chose for no sech performance. I——"

"No!" blazed Marshall at him so suddenly that he jumped back. "A miserable, cowardly cur like you is not worth fighting! I want a *man*!"

Somebody laughed a jeering laugh, and somebody else echoed it, and Bud Davis fell back in the crowd with all the demon in him roused and ready for the demoniac.

"Who do you want?" Ri Slaton asked the question rather in whimsical curiosity than in any spirit of accepting the challenger's audacious terms.

"Trav Williams," promptly replied Marshall in shrewd pursuance of his desperate stratagem. The girl with Babe Davis caught her breath with a smothered scream. There was a ripple in the crowd again—this time of sheer admiration.

Trav Williams, who had so far held aloof like a silent, overshadowing fate, now laid his gun aside and came forward with a look of self-conscious pride and satisfaction—he had had the compliment of his life. Between a desire to demonstrate how well he deserved Marshall's subtle praise and the recollection that he had not yet punished this foolhardy stranger for daring to threaten him, and in the presence of a whole storeful of men, Trav lost his head. Then, too, the girl herself was looking on—the girl about whom Marshall had dared to give *him* orders—and the girl who had interfered between him and what he most coveted. Here was a chance to even up

with the stranger, and to punish, more terribly than in any other way, that re-embodied spirit of Welch Dale's that had dared to cross his path again to plague him.

With one long insolent look at Mary Elizabeth he came forward and took his choice of the blades.

"Don't do hit, Trav," urged one of the now excited crowd. "Le's——"

"Do you think he can't hold his own?" asked Marshall with a subtle smile.

"No, but, Trav, he's jest a——"

"Your friends seem to be uneasy about you," said Marshall to the now thoroughly roused man before him.

"Wa-al, I ain't oneasy," replied the man grimly, and then to the protesting crowd: "Who's a-runnin' this here thing, I'd like to know? No, I don't need your advice an' I don't need your he'p. Stand back, boys!" and the crowd widened.

The two men grasped their weapons and stepped apart, but Marshall held up his hand against the signal to begin.

"Men," he said firmly, but pleadingly, "that girl *must* be taken out—it's barbarous to let her witness a thing like this. Make her go! *Pick her up and carry her!*"—this because he had caught the defiance of her glance.

Two very young fellows and Ri Slaton moved toward her in spite of a growl of disapproval from Trav Williams, but she somehow gave Babe the slip again,

and in a twinkling had snatched a pistol from a nearby shelf.

"Keep back!" she exclaimed. "Did Welch Dale ever play the weakling?"

The men of her people knew the type better than did Marshall, and they turned their attention again to him.

"Let *me* put her out that door," he entreated.

But at a signal from Trav, Eli Hawkins was already counting, "One, two—" and Marshall barely had time to make ready for the spring of his adversary on the loud and ringing "three!"

The circle instantly gave back. But all that the girl could see was two men locked together, so evenly matched, so desperately opposed, that they seemed for a long time scarcely to move at all, and only the initiated could have guessed at how great a cost each slight advance of foot or hand was made, could feel how eloquent of tremendous force was every inclination backward or forward of each powerful form.

Suddenly the circle closed in in breathless excitement and the girl could see no more, but she could guess how the struggle went, by the alternate cursing and cheering of the excited crowd.

The sounds of struggle increased—and then, a terrible, sickening fall, and savage cheer upon cheer! Babe Davis clapped his big hand over the girl's eyes, but there was no need of it, for her vision was swimming before her; but still in her ears were the sounds of struggle—terrible, tense struggle—this time of two bodies that were writhing upon the floor, and which

was above and which beneath she knew only too well by the tightness of Babe Davis's hand upon her eyes.

Then all suddenly fell a silence—a silence more terrible than any sound of struggle could have been. Babe Davis's hand dropped away.

The on-lookers seemed petrified as they stood in a widened circle now, where all might see. A man lay on his back with stark, wide eyes staring at the shingles above, and another knelt above him with something red in his weapon hand. The kneeling man raised his eyes slowly—

"Mary, I *had* to do it," he said.

Then out of the awed silence came one clear, sharp sound, and John Marshall dropped back, wide-eyed too, and staring at the shingles above.

"Bud Davis! *Coward!*" and Welchel Dale's child was beside the man who had fallen, with her hand over the ugly hole in his breast.

Then, amid the pandemonium that broke loose, Bud Davis went creeping, creeping toward the girl. Evil epithets were pouring from his lips, his great fist was tight clinched.

But he did not reach her, for a long, gaunt, but powerful man swung full upon him.

There were sounds of another fierce struggle, but Mary Elizabeth did not *had* this time. Her ear was laid to the heart of the man who was staring as Trav Williams stared—neither did she realize when brother and brother, in the death struggle together because of her, staggered in the blindness of their

hate, and pitched out of the open door to have their final reckoning together in outer darkness.

Mary Elizabeth did not heed, for her ear was laid to the heart of the man who had fallen, and that heart had not answered her.

And then—somehow—nothingness!

CHAPTER XXVI

MARY ELIZABETH stared at the wall. It was just the inside of weather-boarding, and was quite rough—but it was whitewashed—that was very nice. But—some one was speaking—speaking—outside.

"Dead—both of them," the voice said. "Brothers, too, they say. Fought the life out of each other like wild beasts there in the rain and dark. It would be an interesting story to know from the beginning."

Whom could he be talking about? And whose voice was it that sounded so strange? Mary Elizabeth sat up and looked about her, wondering. She was in a little shed-room somewhere—a perfectly strange shed-room. Three sides were roughly boarded up. To the left was a wall of logs—the main house was on that side. But what house? The strange voice was speaking again:

"Ready, Felix? Take this and ride to the cross-roads store that Mr. Horton directed you to. Ask for the storekeeper himself, and rent a team and wagon from him at any cost. Tell the old man that John Marshall was killed in an attack on his cabin last night, and that his friends want to remove the body."

Mary Elizabeth sat still.

Primitive life lies ever close to tragedy, and primitive women have been bred through the centuries

to suffer supremely and be silent. Mary Elizabeth sat still. Yes, she remembered, but the wild agony of it all was past. Indeed, this could not be called suffering at all—this dead, unfeeling calm.

So this was the end, and she was facing—that whitewashed wall.

Then, by almost subconscious movement, she was straightening out her dark locks and was braiding the heavy mass of curls down her back. She stood up—it took an effort to do it, for her limbs ached now, and now the whitewashed wall was threatening to slip away. But, in a moment or two of steadying, things cleared for her, and she turned to a door that she found, and opened it.

One step, and she was out on a small back porch and standing over two strange men who were seated on the steps. In the next instant they were on their feet facing her, and their hats were quickly removed after a manner that was not of the hills. They had on big riding-boots, she somehow took in, and one of them had nice eyes.

"Why, why, you've come to your senses—you've waked up at last, have you?" he of the nice eyes inquired with gentle solicitude. "I'm afraid I make a poor sick-nurse not to keep a sharper eye on my patient."

"Yes," said the girl, in answer to his question, "and this house——?"

"Is the haunted house."

"Where is *he*?" she asked, and she laid her hand hard against the door facing.

"In here," he replied in a low tone, and he pointed to a half-open door. "Do you want to see him?"

For answer she followed him into the darkened room. His step was very quiet and he held his soft wool hat in his hand as he led the way to the bed in the dim corner. The girl slipped past him and paused by the form that was stretched out before her. She lifted back tenderly a stray lock of hair that lay on the white forehead, when—John Marshall turned his head slightly and opened his eyes full upon her. There was a moment of dead pause, and then——

"Is it life or death for me?—say which," he whispered.

The girl dropped on the floor beside him with her head and arms on the bed. She was sobbing aloud now from the shock of too great joy, and the wounded man was struggling to quiet her.

"I saw you killed before my eyes," she cried frantically. "I saw Bud Davis shoot you!"

"John, Doc says you must lie still!" The man who had entered with her was speaking now, and with authority. "My dear young lady, *try* to be quiet!"

"You said he was dead, yourself," she declared in a wild whisper, while the desperately controlled sobs shook her slight frame. "I heard you send word to the store!"

"Oh, did *you* hear that ruse!" exclaimed the man. "I sent that message to keep off other attacks till we could get John safe away. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," but stooping low over her he whispered:

"You ~~must~~ control yourself. John is very badly hurt."

"Fred Dearing," said the wounded man in a pitifully weak voice, "if you whisper to my sweetheart again, I'll get up from here and knock the top of your head off!"

Between the whispered warning, Marshall's attempt at lightness, and her own inherent heroism, the girl got herself in hand again.

The threatened danger to the top of his head, or something else, took Fred Dearing over to the mantelshelf and busied him there. His back was turned squarely to them as John Marshall gathered the half-plaited curls that hung over the girl's shoulder and pulled her face over very close to his own.

"You haven't answered my question, yet," he whispered, looking deep into her violet eyes.

With one swift glance at Dearing's back, she stooped and kissed him. And then her soft cheek was pressed to his own, and he was whispering as he held her to him:

"Life, girl, is so vastly bigger than any theory of it!"

Fred Dearing was back again in a minute or two, this time looking rather grim, the girl thought.

"John," he said, and Mary Elizabeth shrank at what she felt was a touch of hardness in his voice; "John, Frierly is going to leave for camp in a few minutes, and I want you to send that order."

"I'll not do it," answered the sick man, promptly, in a voice that sounded like the ghost of his old voice at its hardest.

The man at the foot of the bed looked grimmer still. "You can't mean that," he said.

"Yes, I can, too."

Mary Elizabeth was bewildered at a steel-like gaze that was exchanged between them, and more bewildered still when the man at the foot of the bed promptly turned and left the room. On the threshold, however—her eyes had followed him—he paused and signalled for her to follow.

It took something of finesse, and much of shameless bribery, to enable her to get away from the sick man, but Mary Elizabeth accomplished it at last and joined Fred Dearing on the back porch. He drew to the door behind her.

"You don't know what happened last night after John was shot, do you? You've been delirious, you know."

"No," said the girl, and the dark pupils of her eyes dilated suddenly.

"Well, about forty-five of us from the camp got here just as John was plugged—we had been warned of his danger by a little hillite named Tony Thaggin, and came full-armed, so we easily surrounded and caught nearly the whole gang. Of course some were wounded on both sides, but we bagged the bunch at last. When the fight was over, about half of our men escorted the captives to camp with the intention of keeping them prisoners there till they could be turned over to the county authorities."

The girl, who had been listening with wild eagerness, now interrupted, excitedly:

"And what—what will that mean?"

"The penitentiary or worse, for the last one of them."

"No, oh, no!" she gasped.

"*You* feel for them, too?" he exclaimed, passionately. "See here, those poor devils were fighting for what they believed to be their own—but I can't make John see it right—I can't move him. And he's so sick, I'm afraid——"

"Was that what you and he were talking about?"

"Yes, I've been trying to make him send an order for those fellows to be turned loose before the sheriff and posse get there—his word is law at the camp—but he's like flint. He's——"

The girl turned to the door quickly, but the man laid his hand on her arm.

"Are you going to John about it?"

"Yes."

"He's awfully sick, you know—a doctor who came with us says it's a question—it's bad to stir him up, but——"

"How soon would this message have to be sent to save them?" she asked.

"Why, now, if at all."

The two looked at each other for a moment of wavering, and then the girl made the decision. She opened the door and re-entered the room, followed by Dearing. The young fellow whom she had seen with Dearing when she regained consciousness, now came up the back steps and entered immediately after them.

John Marshall's dull eyes lighted pitifully as the

girl came to him and took her seat on the edge of the bed beside him.

"Mr. Frierly is ready to go," she said very gently. "Have you any message to send? Have you? *Have* you?" She was leaning over him with her violet eyes looking deep into his soul.

Marshall started and turned his head away.

"No!" he exclaimed, feebly, but passionately.

"Haven't you—dear?"

But the hard look came into his graying face again.

"Yes, Frierly," he said, sharply and bitterly, to the one who had entered last; "tell Horton to *hold* those men——"

But a small firm hand was promptly laid over his mouth and a girl's fearless eyes were challenging his own.

"You are too weak to talk," she said; "I am 'stronger'"—with an accent that only he and she understood. "Mr. Frierly," looking up at the man who still awaited orders, "tell Mr. Horton that Mr. Marshall says *hold those men no longer*—that they are hardly to be blamed for the step they took."

The little hand was pressed suddenly tighter over the lips that were touched with cruelty. Fred Dearing's eyes widened quickly.

"Tell him," continued the girl, "that Mr. Marshall says to assure the prisoners they shall be paid a handsome price for their farms, and that no injustice or unkindness shall be done them. And . . . and . . . get them to promise peace."

Fred Dearing was breathless.

Frierly stood with indecision. He was stupid at best, but he had his grave doubts now.

he girl slowly removed her hand from John Marshall's mouth, but she still held his eyes with her own.

"You are too weak to talk much, just 'yes' will do"—and then in a swift whisper—"Do you love me?"

"Yes!"

Frierly departed with his astounding message, and Fred Dearing considerably followed him out of the room and closed the door behind them.

One of the men, who had been doing picket duty since the fracas, came up to the steps for news.

"How's John?" he inquired anxiously.

"Very much better," said Dearing.

Dearing and Frierly had been gone some time and John Marshall lay asleep in the quiet room, when the front door opened softly, and a long, loose figure was silhouetted in the doorway. There were deep shadows in the erstwhile smiling old eyes, but a pale morning sunlight rested on the thin gray hair.

He looked from the quiet figure on the bed to the girl who sat quiet beside it. He stood irresolute till she held out her hand to him, when he tip-toed across the creaking floor to her side.

"Honey," he said, as his rough hands closed sympathetically over both her own, "*honey!*"

"Uncle Beck, I *need* you!"

"I 'lowed you did, Blossom, that's why I come. The feller what brought me the message said you was here."

"It has been such an awful, awful night!" she whispered, and she laid her white forehead down upon the knotted old hands to which she still clung.

"A awful night, honey, but the sun rose on time this mornin'—try to believe that."

"You heard?" she whispered, and her cold hands tightened on his own as if never to let him go.

"I heerd, honey."

"You know how much there is in him—you know, Uncle Beck!"

"Yes, honey, I know thar was a great big *man* in him."

"You saw—you and Babe saw—when even my eyes were blinded——"

"You seen only one thing at a time, Blossom, but you ain't to blame for that—hit's your sex that's the fault of hit. Me an' Babe knowed thar was a splendid sperit in him. Me an' Babe—" the old man turned his gaze to the long, straight form on the bed, and started violently.

"Why—why—why—Ma'y 'Lizbeth—is that thing *a-movin'*?" he exclaimed in a startled whisper.

"Yes, but he's sleeping soundly. If we whisper, we'll not wake him."

"In the name o' God, gal, ain't he *dead*?"

"Why, *no indeed*, Uncle Beck!"—in a tone that was, for some unaccountable reason, perfectly indignant, and then—"O-o-oh, I remember!—the message!"

The recollection of that message, as heard in that strange, dim awakening, suddenly overwhelmed her,

and the next moment she lay sobbing against the old man's shoulder at the remembered agony, telling him, in wild and broken whispers, all that she knew of the storm that had swept over, and of the wreckage that it had left.

"*Tell me that ag'in, Ma'y 'Lizabeth*"—the old man was left saying to her, and the big hands that now grasped both her shoulders were shaking as he spoke.

"*Tell me that ag'in!*— *I nem fellers was took prisoner, and the sheriff an' his posse sont for—?*"

"Yes, but they will be turned loose before the sheriff gets there—I made him send the order. Uncle Beck, I held him down and made him send the order."

"But he's got their lands—he's got their lands an' he's goin' to keep 'em!"

"Yes, but if you'll believe me, he's going to pay for them, and pay well." Then, answering the shadow of scepticism in his troubled eyes: "He has promised me that he will, and he keeps the faith he pledges. *I'm* going to see that he is not only just but generous to every one of them. And I am going to make him let me do for them and for their children."

The two of them turned and looked at the sleeping subject of their whispers as he lay before them, the embodiment of aggressiveness and power.

There was a long period of silence between them, and then the old man said:

"You've got a handful, honey; he's a big proposition."

But the girl laid her slender hand on the powerful breast of the sleeping man, and looked up at the gray-haired doubter with the fire of Welchel Dale's undying courage in her eyes.

"*I'm bigger than he is!*" she said.

The long-banished smile returned slowly, wrinkling the kindly old face into a semblance of its wonted cheerfulness as he shook his head gently and replied:

"Likewise John Marshall ain't goin' to have no bed o' roses—no siree! He ain't, to say, a-goin' to be bored to death for lack o' bein' poked up!—Wa-al, wa-al, an' did I ever think I'd come to bank on that thar temper!"

Her eyes sought the face of the sleeping man again, and their spirit softened.

"It isn't going to be so hard, after all," she said.

"No, kitten, he's got his good p'int—*but*——"

"But *what*, Uncle Beck?"

"Oh, nothin'; but I'm glad hit's you instead o' me that's got to manage him."

"Why, why"—indignantly—"you said yourself that he had a fine spirit—that he had 'a great big man in him.'"

"Go slow, Ma'y 'Lizbeth, go slow! That was when I thought the man was dead. Them was post-mortem feelin's, so to speak, an' post-mortem feelin's never was designed to fit the livin' man. You'll have to let me take a consider'ble tuck in 'em, honey!"

"No, Uncle Beck—" but the old man went on:

"Sixty-nine year—*sixty-nine* year, an' then to

make the fool mistake o' praisin' a man while the breath is in his body!"

There was a long silence between them in which both their faces gradually became very grave. The girl's gaze had sought the fire now—she was struggling again with remembrance. All at once she turned to the old man:

"Uncle Beck," she exclaimed in an awed whisper, "Uncle Beck, *where's Babe?*"

He looked sharply at her white face for a moment, and then replied, in a business-like, cheery tone:

"Babe? Why, Babe's all right, honey. Nobody ain't never captured Babe! Yes, yes, honey, Babe's all right. He was some done up by last night—but—he's—restin' this mornin'."

The long hours of delirium that had mercifully interposed between the vivid terrors of the night and that dim awakening to the pale day had left the girl too dazed to fathom what the old eyes were saying. She accepted what she heard with a sigh of relief, and turned back to the sleeping man beside her.

After a little, she spoke again, and this time there was a certain defiance in her tone:

"Uncle Beck," she said, "I'm going to marry John Marshall."

"I could a-told you that months ago, Blossom."

"It may be wrong," she ventured, "I know you think it is wrong— Of course it *must* be wrong"—for the old man was looking away now—"but life—'life is so vastly bigger than any theory of it!' You see him here—I couldn't leave him now—I——"

He did not answer her, but sat with his face still turned away. After a tense moment of waiting the girl broke down completely.

"I *need* you, Uncle Beck!"

"I'm here, child."

"But I shall need you always."

"Then I 'spec I'll have to keep in reach."

"I'm afraid, Uncle Beck, I'm *afraid*!"

"*Honey!*"

"What if—if in the big new world he will lead me into—what if I should lose the way?"

"But you *mustn't*!"

"But if his paths prove alluring—if I wander too far from the hills— Won't you call me back, Uncle Beck, won't you call me back?"

John Marshall lay asleep—asleep with the returning joy of life beating through his veins—asleep with the fulness of triumph and the peace of perfect bliss written in every line of his strong face—for Life gives abundantly to him who asks neither great nor greatly good things at her hands.

But the woman who watched beside him was looking away now—now that the lids were closed over his warm and all-demanding, all-absorbing, waking gaze. The tide of life was running low for her. Could it be that she was lonely? Lonely for something that should be here and was not?

And would a grave-eyed memory suffice? But he was not here. He would never come again, for she had failed of his high purpose, had compromised

with sin! Here, beside this man, this poor exponent of power, that just spirit could never come; and here was to be her place forevermore.

Then, as if in answer, her hand rested on the pocket of her skirt, and she felt the folds of a paper within. In a flash she remembered that Uncle Beck had put it there, and had said that it was a message from her guardian.

She took the envelope out with strangely mixed emotions and read, inscribed upon it: "For Mary Elizabeth, in her hour of failure."

The message for this hour!

She tore open the envelope, but at the first recognition of the familiar hand, the lines were sadly blurred. It took her a minute or two to see them plainly. The message ran:

DEAR CHILD:

I am appealing to you in this your hour of failure—I who have failed in what I hoped to do for you here. I am asking that you come back to me and let me try again.

It is with great self-reproach that I let you go to-day, for I am sending you out into the world to get the development that I somehow failed to help you to. If I had been your father I suppose that something of wisdom would have been mine by virtue of parenthood, but we childless men are apt to make mistakes with children.

It seems cruel to you to-day that I am sending you back to work among your own people, but when you read this in your hour of failure, you may forgive.

I do not hope great achievements from you. You cannot work out the salvation of any people for them; you can, with your very best effort, but touch their lives on the surface and hope for development from within.

The great question is: How is it to-day with the woman in your soul?

It is for your sake that I condemn you to this task. You need something to sacrifice for, to work for, something to awaken your Christian charity. Ask yourself when you read this if you are a deeper, tenderer, braver woman than the one I sent away.

You are temperamentally high-spirited, Mary Elizabeth, self-sufficient and self-absorbed, and once or twice I fear I have surprised ingratitude and even hardness in you. But these are, after all, only unripenesses of character. It may be that in this hour they have dropped away.

If so, my child, let us not call this a time of failure, but rather a very blessed hour of triumph, for, believe me, the only thing which it is given to you to surely direct is the set of your own soul.

Just what you have attempted in the task to which I condemned you—just how far you have failed—I have no way of knowing. I rest secure, however, in the hope that you have done your human best.

And I charge you not to despair. In a lifetime of trying to help, I have rarely had a single plan of my making eventuate as I hoped; but I have never once failed to trust that sometime, somewhere, good would come of even every mistake that was made in the love of God. I absolve you now from further effort at what I knew would, so far as you yourself could see, ultimately fail; but I urge on you this last injunction: Accept compromise or defeat without bitterness, knowing that the Hearer of Prayer can bring ultimate triumph out of our saddest failures.

I am hoping with all that is in me for a sweetening and chastening of spirit for you; and fearing most of all a narrowing to bigotry that does not recognize all the universe as God's. I would have you forbear to condemn.

And yet, I would have you hold fast to your ideals, even though the best that the idealist can hope for now is to speed, by a helping hand to whosoever stumbles, the coming of the

far-off divine event. The command to be perfect was given to the race as the Ultima Thule of its spiritual evolution. It is your part to make a step forward. It is your part to see that somewhere in your soul there burns always an altar fire.

Come to me if you need me in this hour.

YOUR GUARDIAN.

And there, beside the man who slept in questionable triumph, even there in that spot that was haunted by the violence of sin, Mary Elizabeth turned back to her guardian spirit to receive at last a perfect dedication—a dedication, not only to the uplift of her own scattered people, but to the best that she could accomplish for the man beside her, who belonged, like them, to the universe of God.

And when she gently laid back the dark lock that made the white forehead of the sleeping man look too much like death, there was no touch of bitterness left within her soul—only a secret sense of incompleteness.

She knew that she loved this man with all her heart—she knew that she would continue to love him with all her heart, along whatever way they should take together—to the end. But she knew, too, that within her inmost soul would be always a Holy of Holies into which he could not come.